THARON of LOST VALLEY

VINGIE E. ROE

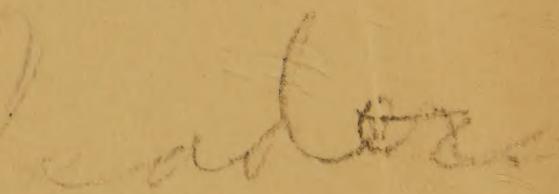
Jan- 1926—

To- Blimp alias Billie.

~~From~~ —.

Hiro alias Perry.

Let's hope this is one you haven't read yet.



THARON OF LOST VALLEY

AS EL REY ROSE ON HIS HIND FEET WHIRLING, THAT UNWAVERING MUZZLE WHIRLED ALSO TO KEEP IN LINE *Page* 67

THARON OF LOST VALLEY

BY

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

Made in the United States of America

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THARON OF LOST VALLEY

THARON OF LOST VALLEY

CHAPTER I

THE GUN MAN'S HERITAGE

LOST VALLEY lay like a sparkling jewel, fashioned in perfection, cast in the breast of the illimitable mountain country—and forever after forgotten of God.

A tiny world, arrogantly unconscious of any other, it lived its own life, went its own ways, had its own conceptions of law—and they were based upon primeval instincts.

Cattle by the thousand head ran on its level ranges, riders jogged along its trail-less expanses, their broad hats pulled over their eyes, their six-guns at their hips. Corvan, its one town, ran its nightly games, lined its familiar streets with swinging-doored saloons.

Toward the west the Cañon Country loomed behind its sharp-faced cliffs, on the east the rolling ranges, dotted with oak and digger-pine, went

gradually up to the feet of the stupendous peaks that cut the sapphire skies.

Lost indeed, it was a paradise, a perfect place of peace but for its humans. Through it ran the Broken Bend, coming in from the high and jumbled rocklands at the north, going out along the sheer cliffs at the south.

Out of its ideal loneliness there were but two known ways, and both were worth a man's best effort. Down the river one might drive a band of cattle, bring in a loaded pack train, single file against the wall. That was a twelve days' trip. Up through the defiles at the west a man on foot might make it out, provided he knew each inch of the Secret Way that scaled False Ridge.

It was spring, the time of greening ranges and the coming of new calves. Soft winds dipped and wantoned with Lost Valley, in the Cañon Country shy flowers, waxen, heavy-headed on thin stems, clung to the rugged walls.

All day the sun had shone, mild as a lover, coaxing, promising. The very wine of life was a-pulse in the air.

All day Tharon Last had sung about her work scouring the boards of the kitchen floor until they were soft and white as flax, helping old Anita with the dinner for the men, seeing about the number of new palings for the garden. She had swept

every inch of the deep adobe house, had fixed over the arrangement of Indian baskets on the mantel, had filled all the lamps with coal-oil. She was very careful with the lamps, trimming the wicks to smokeless perfection, for oil was scarce and precious in Lost Valley, as were all outside products, since they must come in at long intervals and in small quantities. And as she worked she sang, wild, wordless melodies in a natural voice as rich as a harp. That voice of Tharon's was one of the wonders of Lost Valley. Many a rider went by that way on the chance that he might catch its golden music adrift on the breeze, her father's men came up at night to hear its martial stir, its tenderness, for the voice was the girl, and Tharon was an unknown quantity, sometimes all melting sweetness, sometimes fire that flashed and was still.

So on this day she sang, since she was happy. Why, she did not know. Perhaps it was because of the six new puppies in the milk-house, rolling in awkward fatness against their shepherd mother, whose soft eyes beamed up at the girl in beautiful pride. Perhaps it was because of the springtime in the air.

At any rate she worked with all the will and pleasure of youth in a congenial task, and the roses of health bloomed in her cheeks. The sun

itself shone in her tawny hair where the curls made waves and ripples, the blue skies of Lost Valley were faithfully reflected in her eyes.

Her skin was soft-golden, the enchanting skin of some half-blonds which can never be duplicated by all the arts of earth, and her full mouth was scarlet as pomegranates.

Sometimes old Anita who had raised her, would stop and look at her in wonder, so beautiful was she to old and faithful eyes.

And not alone to Anita was she entirely lovely.

There was not a full grown man in Lost Valley who would not go many a mile to look upon her—with varying desires. Few voiced their longings, however, for Jim Last was notorious with his guns and could protect his daughter. He had protected her for twenty years, come full summer, and he asked no odds of any. His eyes were like Tharon's—blue and changing, with odd little lines that crinkled about them at the corners, elongating them in appearance. He was a big man, vital and quiet. The girl took her stature from him. Her flashes of fire came from her mother, of whom she knew little and of whom Jim Last said nothing. Once as a child she had asked him, after the manner of children, about this mother of dim memories, and his eyes had hazed with a look of

suffering that scared her, he had struck his palm upon a table, and said only:

"She was an angel straight out of Heaven. Don't ask me again."

So Tharon had not asked again, though she had wondered much.

Sometimes old Anita, become garrulous with age, mumbled in the twilight when the rose and the lavendar lights swept down the eastern ramparts and across the rolling range lands, and the girl gleaned scattered pictures of a gentle and lovely creature who had come with her father out of a mystic country somewhere "below."

"Below" meant down the river and beyond, an unnamable region.

In the big living room there was one relic of this mysterious mother, a tiny melodeon, its rosewood case a trifle marred by unknown hardships, its ivory keys yellow with age. It had two small pedals and two slender sticks which fitted therein and pushed the bellows up and down when one trampled upon them. And to Tharon this little old instrument was wealth of the Indies. The low piping of its reedy notes made an accompaniment of surpassing sweetness when she sat before it and sang her wordless melodies. And just as she found music in her throat without conscious effort, so she found it in her fingers, deep, resonant chords for

her running minors, thin, trickling streams of lightness for her own slow notes.

The sun had turned to the west in its majestic course and Tharon, the noon work over, drew up the spindle-legged stool and sat down to play to herself and Anita. The old woman, half Mexic, half Indian, drowsed in a low chair by the eastern window, her toil-hard hands clasped in her lap, a black *reboso* over her head, though the day was warm as summer. A kitten frisked in the sunlight at the open door, wild ducks, long domesticated, squalled raucously down the yards, some cattle slept in the huge corrals and the little world of Last's Holding was at peace. It seemed that only the girl idling over the yellowed keys, was awake.

For a long and happy hour Tharon sat so, sometimes opening her pretty throat in ambitious flights of sound, again humming lowly—and that was enchanting, as if one sang lullabies to flaxen heads on shoulders.

And it did enchant one—a man who stood for the better part of that hour at the edge of the deep window in the adobe wall and watched the singer.

He was a splendid figure of a man, tall, broad, muscular, built for strength and endurance. His face was unduly lined, even for his age, which was

near fifty, but the eyes under the arched black brows were vital as a hawk's. He wore the customary garments of the Lost Valley men, broad sombrero, flannel shirt, corduroys and cowboy boots, stitched and decorated above their high heels. At his hips hung two guns, spurs clinked when he stepped unguardedly. He rarely stepped that way, however.

When presently the girl at the melodeon ceased and drew the lid over the keys with reverent fingers, he moved silently back a pace or two along the wall. Then he waited. As he had anticipated, she came to the door to look upon the budding world, and for another moment he watched her with a strange expression. Then he swung forward and let the spurs rattle. Tharon flashed to face him like a startled animal.

"Hello, Tharon," he said and smiled. The girl stared at him with quick insolence.

"Howdy," she said coldly.

He came close to the doorway, put one hand on the facing, the other on his hip and leaned near. She drew back. He reached out suddenly and gripped her wrist in fingers that bit like steel.

"Pretty," he said, while his dark eyes narrowed.

Tharon flung her whole young strength

against his grip with a twisting wrench and came free. The quick, tremendous effort left her calm. And she did not retreat a step.

"Hell," said the man admiringly, "little wild-cat!"

"What you want?" she asked sharply.

"You," he answered swiftly.

"Buck Courtrey," she said, "you might own an' run Lost Valley—all but one outfit. You ain't never run Last nor put your dirty hand on th' Holdin'. An' that ain't all. You never will. If you ever touch me again, I'll tell Dad Jim an' he'll kill you. I'd a-told him before when you met me that day on the range, only I didn't want his honest hands smutted up with such as you. He's had his killin's before—but they was always in fair-an'-open. You he'd give no quarter—if he knew what you ben askin' me."

The man's eyes narrowed evilly. They became calculating.

"Tell him," he said.

"Eh?"

"Tell him."

"You want to feed th' buzzards?" the girl asked with an insulting peal of laughter.

"Not yet—but I'll remember that speech some day."

"Remember an' be damned," said Tharon.

"Now kindly take your dirty carcass off Last's Holding—back to your wife."

The fire was flashing a little in her blue eyes as she spoke, and she half turned to enter the house.

As she did so, Courtrey flung out an arm and caught her about the shoulders. He drew her against him with the motion and kissed her square on the lips. For a second his narrowed eyes were drunken.

As he loosed her Tharon gasped like a swimmer sinking.

She put up a hand and drew it across her mouth, which was pale as ashes with sudden rage.

"Now," she said, "I'll tell him."

"Do," said Courtrey, and swung away around the wall of the house.

There were no more artless songs that day at Last's Holding. Anita was awake and peering with dim eyes when Tharon came in from the door sill.

"*Mi querida,*" she asked, "what happened?"

"Nothing," said the girl, "it's time to begin supper. Th' boys'll soon be comin' in."

"*Si, si,*" said Anita, "I'll ask José to cut the fresh beef—it has hung long enough in the cooling house."

Supper at Last's was a lively affair. At the

long tables in the eating room the riders gathered, lean, tanned men, young mostly, all alert, quick-eyed, swift in judgment. Their days were full and earnest enough, running Last's cattle on the Lost Valley ranges. The evenings were their own, and they made the most of them. The big house was free to them, and they made it home, smoking, playing cards on the living room table under the hanging lamp, mulling over the work of the day, and begging Tharon to sing to them, sometimes with the instrument, sometimes sitting in the deep east window, when the moon shone, and then they turned out the light and listened in adoring rapture.

For Last's girl was the rose of the Valley, the one absolutely unattainable woman, and they worshipped her accordingly.

Not that she was aloof. Far from it. In her deep heart the whole bunch of boys had a place; singly and collectively. They were her private property, and she would have been inordinately jealous of any one of them had he slipped allegiance.

As the purple and crimson veils began to drape the eastern ramparts where the forests thickened and swept up the slopes, these riders began to come in across the range, driving the herds before them. Running cattle in Lost Valley was no child's

play. Any small bunch of cows left out at night was not there by dawn. Eternal vigilance was the price of safety, and then they were not always safe. Witness poor Harkness, a year ago shot in the back and left to die alone—his band run off in daylight.

They had found him too late, pitifully propped against a stone, the cigarette, he had tried to light to comfort him, dead in his nerveless hand. Tharon had wept and wept for Harkness, for he had been a good comrade, open-hearted and merry. And deep in her soul she harboured dim longings for justice on his murderer—revenge, if you will.

Tonight she thought of him, somehow, as she went about the supper work along with Anita and José and pretty dark Paula. She stood a moment on the broad stone at the kitchen door, a dish of butter from the springhouse under the poplars in her hand, and watched Billy Brent and Curly bring in a bunch from up Long Meadow way. She thought how bright the spotted cattle looked, how lithe and graceful the men, and then her eyes lighted as they always did when she beheld the horses of Last's Holding—the horses of the Finger Marks.

Billy rode Redbuck, Curly Drumfire, and they were princes of a royal blood, albeit Nature's

strain alone. Slim, spirited, wiry, eager heads up, manes flying, bright hoofs flashing in the late sunlight, they came home to Last's after a long day's work, fresh as when they went out at dawn.

"Nothin' ever floors them," Tharon said aloud to herself. "Wonderful creatures."

She set the butter down on the rock at her feet, cupped her hands about her lips and sent out a keen, clear call, two notes, one rising, one falling. It had a livening, compelling quality.

Instantly Drumfire flung up his head and answered it with a ringing whistle, though he did not lose a stride in the flying curve he was performing to head a stubborn yearling that refused in stiff-tailed arrogance to go into the corrals.

The girl smiled and, stooping, picked up her dish and entered.

It was late before the last straggler was in from the range. The boys washed at the big sink on the porch, and were ready for the hearty fare that steamed in the lamp-lighted room. For the last hour Tharon had been watching the eastern slopes for her father.

"He's ridin' late, Anita," she said anxiously as the men trooped in with the usual jest and laughter.

"He went far, no doubt, *Corazon*," said old

Anita comfortably. "He goes so fast on El Rey that time as well as distance flies beneath the shining hoofs."

Anita was like her people, mystic and soft-spoken.

"True," said the girl gently, "I forget, El Rey is mighty. He went very far I make no doubt. We'll hear him comin' soon."

Then she poured steaming coffee in the cups about the table, smiling down in the eyes upturned to hers. Billy, Curly, Bent Smith, Jack Masters and Conford, the foreman, they all had a love-look for her, and the girl felt it like a circling guerdon. She was grateful for the sense of security that seemed to emanate from her father's riders, a bit wistful withal, as if, for the first time in her life, she needed something more than she had always had.

"Which way did Dad go, Billy?" she asked, "north or south?"

"North," said Billy, "he rode th' Cup Rim range today."

When the meal, a trifle silent in deference to Tharon's silence, was done, the men rose awkwardly. They stood a moment, looking about, undecided.

Conford picked them up with his eyes and nodded out. He felt that just maybe the girl

would rather be alone. But Tharon stopped the reluctant egress.

"Don't go, boys," she said, "come on in th' room. There's no moon tonight." But she did not play on the melodeon. Instead she sat in the deep window that looked over the rolling uplands and was quiet, listening.

"Turn out th' light, Bent," she said, "somehow I feel like shadows tonight."

So they sat about in the great room, black with the darkness of the soft spring night, and like the true worshippers they were, they did not speak. Only the red butts of their cigarettes glowed and faded, to glow again and again fade out. Tharon sat curled in the window, her graceful limbs drawn up to her chin, her eyes half closed, her keen ears open like a forest creature's. She was listening for the marked rhythm of the great El Rey, the clap-clap, clap-clap of the king of Last's Holding as he singlefooted down the hollow slopes of the lifting eastern range.

And as she waited she thought of many things. Odd little happenings of her childhood came back to her—the time she had caught her father killing the winter's beef, had wept in hysterical pity and forbidden him to finish.

They had had no meat those long months following—and she had so tired of beans, that she

had never been able to eat them since. She smiled in the dusk as she recalled Jim Last's life-long indulgence of her.

And the time she had wanted to make her own knee-short dresses as long as Anita's, to sweep the floors, with fringe upon them and stripes of bright print.

She had worn them so—at twelve—until she found that they hindered the free use of her young limbs in mounting a horse, free-foot and bareback. Then, once again the memory of her father's face when she questioned him concerning her mother.

"Boys," she said suddenly, smiling to herself, "did you ever know a man like my dad?"

There was a movement among the lounging riders, a shifting of position, a striking of cigarette ash.

"No, sir," said Billy promptly, "there hain't another man's good with a gun as him, not anywhere's in Lost Valley. Not even Buck Courtrey himself. I'd back Jim Last against him, even, in fair-draw. Why?"

"Oh, nothin'," said the girl, "only—listen—Glory!" she added slipping down from the window to stand quietly in the gloom, "that's him now! I was wishin' hard he'd come. Say—listen

—Why,—there's somethin' gone wrong with El Rey's feet! 1—2——3, 4, 5, 6——1—2—Boys—he's breakin' ! Th' king ain't singlefootin' right, for th' first time since Jim Last put a halter on him! Come—come quick!"

Ordinarily Tharon was a bit slow in her movements, as the very graceful often are. Now she was across the room to the western door before a man had moved. They joined her there and she stood at attention, one hand at her breast, the breath held still in her throat. The light, shining through from the eating room beyond, made a halo of her tawny hair. Silently the riders grouped about her and listened.

Sure enough. Down along the range that rang as some open stretches do, there came the clip-clap of a hurrying horse, only now the hoof beats were regular for a little space, to break, halt, start on, and again ring true in the beautiful syncopation of the born singlefooter. The king was coming home, but, alas! not as he had ever come before, in full flight, proud and powerful. He held his speed and sacrificed his certainty to the man who clung desperately to the saddle horn and swayed in wide arcs, so that he must shift continually to keep under him.

Into the dim glow of light at the open door came El Rey at last, great blue-silver stallion, his

big eyes shining like phosphorus, his nostrils wide with horror of the pungent crimson wash that painted his right shoulder.

He stopped at the door-stone, his duty done.

"Dad!" screamed Tharon, shrill as a bugle, for Jim Last, white and dull as a moon in fog, let go his desperate hold on the pommel and slid, deadweight, into the reaching arms that circled him.

They carried him into the living room. Before they had him safely on the wide couch where the Indian blankets glowed, Tharon, trembling but efficient, had lighted the hanging lamp above the table.

Then she pushed the men aside and knelt beside him.

"Dad," she said clearly, "Jim! Jim Last!"

But the gaining of his goal had been too much. For a moment the flickering light in him died down to ashes. Tharon, her face as white as his own, waited in a man-like quiet. She held his stiffened hands and her eyes burned upon his features. With a deadly knowledge she was printing them indelibly upon her heart.

Presently Jim Last sighed and opened his eyes. They sought hers and he smiled, a tender lighting from within. He fumbled for the buckle of his gun-belt. The girl unclasped it and pulled it

free. She noticed that both guns were in their holsters.

"Put it on," whispered the master of Last's Holding.

Without a question Tharon stood up and buckled the belt about her slender waist.

Her father raising himself with difficulty on an elbow, wet his lips.

"Tharon, my girl," he said, "show your dad th' back-hand flip."

Strange play, this, when every second counted, but Last's daughter obeyed him to the letter.

She stepped clear by the table, stood at attention a second, and, with a peculiar outward whirl, lightning-quick, of her two wrists, had him covered with the big blue guns.

He nodded.

"Good as I learned ye," he whispered, "make it better."

"I will," promised Tharon swiftly.

The man closed his eyes, swayed, recovered as Conford caught him, and brightened again.

"Now th' under-sling."

Again she obeyed, replacing the weapons, standing that second at attention, and flipping them from the holsters so quickly that the eye could scarcely catch the motion. Both draws were peculiar—and peculiarly Last's own.

"Good girl," he said with a husk grown suddenly in his voice, "take—three hours—a day. I want t' leave you th' best gun-handler in Lost Valley—because, my girl—you'll—have—to—to—pro——"

He ceased, wilting forward in Conford's arms. Then he opened his eyes again for one last smile at the daughter he had loved above all things on earth, save and except the memory of the woman who had given her to him.

For once in her life Tharon did not wait his finished speech. She saw the Hand reach out of the shadows and flung herself upon his breast where the blood still seeped and fairly forced the last flutter of life to brighten in him. She kissed his rugged cheek.

"Who, Dad," she called into his dulling senses, "tell me who? I'll get him, so help me God!" and she loosed one hand to cross herself, as old Anita had taught her.

But the promise was late. None knew whether or not Jim Last heard it, for before the last word was done the breath had ceased in his throat.

Another twilight came down upon Lost Valley. The wide ranges lay dim and mysterious, grey and pink and lavendar, as if the hand of a Master

Painter had coloured them, as indeed it had. The Rockface at the west was black with shadow for all its rugged miles, the eastern uplands were bathed and aglow with purplish crimson light.

In Corvan lights twinkled all up and down the one main street. Horses were tied at the hitch-racks and among them were the Ironwoods from Courtrey's Stronghold, beautiful big creatures, blood-bay, black-pointed, noticeable in any bunch. There were no Finger Marks, however, the blue roans, red roans and buckskins with the four black stripes on the outside of the knee, as if one had slapped them with a tarred hand, which hailed from Last's. There were horses from all up and down the Valley. Cow ponies and half-breeds of the Ironwood stock which Courtrey would not keep at the Stronghold but was too close to kill, shouldered pintos from the Indian settlements, big, half-wild horses from over the mountains at the North. Inside the brightly lighted saloons men passed back and forth, drank neat liquor at the worn bars, played at the green felt and canvas covered tables. At one, The Golden Cloud, more pretentious than the rest, there foregathered the leading spirits of the Valley. Here Courtrey came and played and drank, his henchmen with him. He was in high mettle this night. Always a con-

tained man, slow to laughter and to speech, he seemed to have unbent more than usual, to respond to the human nature about him. He was not playing steadily as was his wont. He took a turn at poker with three men from the south of the Valley where the river ran out of the Bottle Neck, won a hand or two, threw down the cards and swung away to talk a moment with this one, listen a moment where those two spoke of hushed matters. Always when he came near he was accorded deference. There was nothing sacred from Courtrey of the Stronghold, seated like a feudal place at the north head of Lost Valley, no conversation so private that he could not come in on it if he chose.

For Courtrey was the king of the country, undisputed sovereign, the best gun man north of the Rio Grand and south of the Line, if one excepted Jim Last. With him tonight were Black Bart, tall, swarthy, gimlet-eyed, a helf-breed Mexican, and Wylackie Bob his right-hand man. Without these two he seldom moved. They were both able lieutenants, experts with firearms. A formidable trio, the three went where and when they listed, and few disputed their right-of-way.

Courtrey, a smile in his dark eyes, the wide black hat at an angle on his iron-grey hair, leaned against the high bar and scanned the crowded

room where the riders played and laughed and swore with abandon.

"Heard anything more about Cañon Jim?" he asked Bullard, the proprietor of The Golden Cloud, "ain't come in yet?"

Bullard shook his head.

"No—nor he won't, according to my notion. Think he mistook th' False Ridge drop. Ain't no man could make it up again without th' hammer spike an' rope."

"H'm—don't know. Don't know," mused Courtrey. "I've always thought it could be done. There ought to be a way on th' other side, seems like."

"Well, *ought* an' *is* is two diff'rent things, Buck," grinned Bullard.

"Sure," nodded the king, "sure. An' yet—"

"Hello, Buck."

A soft hand touched Courtrey's shoulder with a subtle caress. He wheeled on the instant, ready, alert. Then he smiled and reaching up, took the hand and held it openly.

"Hello, Lola," he said, "how goes it?"

The newcomer was a woman, full, rounded, dark, and she was past-master of men—as witness the slow glance that she turned interestedly out over the teeming room, even while the pulse in the wrist in Courtrey's clasp leaped like a racer. She

was a perfect specimen of a certain type, beautiful after a resplendent fashion, full of eye and lip, confident, calm. She was brilliantly clad in crimson and black, and rings of value shone on her ivory-like hands.

Lola of the Golden Cloud was known all over Lost Valley. Men who had no women worshipped her—and some who had, also. At the Stronghold at the Valley's head there was a woman who hated her, though she had never set eyes on her—Courtrey's wife.

If Lola knew this she had never mentioned it, wise creature that she was. Proud of her beauty and her power she had reigned at The Golden Cloud in supreme indifference, even to her men themselves, it seemed, though hidden undercurrents ran strong in her. Which way they tended many a reckless buck of Lost Valley would have given much to know, among them Courtrey himself.

Now she pulled her hand away from him and sauntered over to a table where five men sat playing, laid it upon the shoulder of one of them, leaned down and looked at the cards in his hand.

The man, a tall stripling in a silver-studded belt, looked up, flattered.

Courtrey by the bar watched her, still smiling.

Then he turned back to Bullard and went on with his conversation.

Over by the wall a man on a raised dais began to tune an ancient fiddle.

Two more women came in from somewhere at the back, a big blooming girl by the name of Sadie, and a small red-head, tragically faded, with soft brown eyes that should never have looked upon Bullard's. Two men rose and took them as the tune, an old-fashioned waltz, began to ripple under the fingers of the fiddler, who was a born musician, and the four swung down between the tables and the bar. The Golden Cloud was in full swing, running free for the night, though the soft twilight was scarcely faded from the beautiful country without.

Slip—step, slip—step—went the dancing feet to the accompaniment of rattling spurs. These men were lithe and active, able to dance with amazing grace in chaps and the full accoutrement of the rider. They even wore their broad brimmed hats.

Why should they not, since none objected?

Bullard, solid, stocky, red-faced, leaned on his bar and watched the busy room with pleased eyes.

He did not hear a voice which called his name, once or twice, among the jumble of sounds. Presently an odd figure came round the end of the bar

from a door that opened there into the mysterious back regions of the place and elbowed in to face him.

This was a little old man, weazened and bent, his unkempt head thrust forward from hunched shoulders. He dragged two grain sacks behind him, and he was so grotesquely bow-legged that the first sight of him always provoked laughter. This was old Pete the snow-packer, bound on his nightly trip to the hills. Outside his burros waited, their pack-saddles empty.

By dawn they would come down from the world's rim, the grain sacks bulging with hard-packed snow for the cooling of Bullard's liquor.

"Dick," he said when he faced his employer, "here 'tis time t' start an' there ain't a damned bit o' grub put up fer me! Ef ye don't make that pig-tailed Chink pay 'tention t' my wants, I quit! I quit, I tell ye!"

And he emphasized his vehement protest by whirling the bags over his head and flailing them upon the floor.

A roar of laughter greeted him, which brought dim tears of indignation to his old eyes.

"Ye don't care a damn!" he whimpered in impotent rage. "Jes' 'cause it's me. Ef 'twas yer ol' Chink, now—if 'twas him, th' ol' he-pig-tail, ye'd——"

"Hold on, Pete," said Bullard, slapping an indulgent hand on the grotesque shoulder. "You go tell Wan Lee that if he don't put up th' best lunch in camp for you, an' *muy pronto* at that, I'll come in an' skin him alive. Tell him——"

But Bullard was never to finish that sentence.

There was a sound of running horses stopping square at the rack without, the rattle of chains, the creak of saddles.

Booted feet struck the boards of the porch, and almost upon the instant the great iron door of The Golden Cloud swung inward.

The dancers stopped in their stride, the players laid down their cards, the noise of the room ceased with the suddenness that characterized the time and place, for Lost Valley was quick upon the trigger, tragedy often swept in upon hilarity.

In the opening stood Tharon Last, her blue eyes black and sparkling, her tawny skin cream white, her lips tight-set and pale. She wore a plain dark dress that buttoned up the front, and at her hips there hung her father's famous guns. Her two hands rested on their butts.

Behind her head against the starlight there was the dim suggestion of massed sombreros.

For a moment she stood so in breathless silence, scanning the room.

Then her glance came to rest on the face of Buck Courtrey.

" Men," she said clearly, " we buried Jim Last today. El Rey brought him home last night—finished. You all know he was a gun man—th' best in these parts. It was no gun man that killed him, in fair-an'-open, for he was shot in th' back. It was a skunk, a coyote, a son-of-th'-devil, an' I'm goin' to kill him."

At the last word there was a lightning movement at the bar as Courtrey's hand flashed at his hip, a flash of fire, a shot that went high and lodged in the deep beam above the door, for the weazened form of the snow-packer had leaped up against him in the same instant.

The girl had not moved. Her hands still rested on the guns in their holsters. Now a grim smile curled her mouth, but her eyes did not laugh.

" I'm a-goin' t' kill him," she said quietly, still in that clear voice, " but I'll do it accordin' to th' law Jim Last laid down to me all my life—in certainty. I know—but I'll prove. We hain't no assassins, Jim Last an' me. Some day I'll draw—an' my father's killer must beat me to it."

Without another word Tharon backed out on the porch, the door swung to at the pull of an unseen hand on the iron strap by the hinge.

There was again the rattle and creak, the whirl

of hoofs, and in the breathless stillness that lasted for a few seconds, there came to the strained ears in the Golden Cloud the clip-clap of a singlefooter as the great El Rey led out of town.

Then Buck Courtrey, flushed and unsmiling, sent his coldly narrowed eyes over the crowded room, man by man. Laughter came, a trifle cracked and forced, cards slapped on the tables, chairs creaked as the players drew up again, the dancers swung into step as the fiddle took up its interrupted strain.

Only Lola, over by the door, looked for a pregnant moment at Courtrey's face, and shut her lips in a hard, straight line.

Then, lastly, the cold eyes of the king came down to rest upon the weazened figure of the snow-packer busily engaged in rolling up his sacks for departure. If the strange old creature knew and felt their promise, he gave no sign as he trundled himself outdoors on his bandy legs.

"Skunks," said Old Pete, as he fumbled with his straps about the patient burros, "are plumb pizen t' pure flesh."

CHAPTER II

THE HORSES OF THE FINGER MARKS

AT Last's Holding a change had taken place. The sun of spring still shone as brightly, the work of the place went on as usual. The riders went at dawn and came at dusk, their herds lowing across the rolling green spaces, the days were as busy as they had ever been, but it seemed as if Last's waited for something that would never happen, for some one who would never come. Conford, quiet, forceful, business-like, carried on the work without a ripple. To a casual eye all things were as they had been. But to the keen eyes in the tanned faces of Last's riders the change was appallingly apparent. They saw it creep day by day into their lives, felt it in the very atmosphere, and it was grim and promising.

Old Anita felt it and watched with dim and wistful eyes. Pretty young Paula from the Pomo Indian settlement far to the north of the Valley under the Rockface felt it and was more silent,

cat-like of step than ever. José, always full of laughter at his outside work, was sobered.

For this change was not material, but spiritual, and it had to do with Tharon, who was now the mistress of Last's.

She no longer sang her wordless songs, no longer played for hours on the little old melodeon by the western door. Something had gone from the brightness of her face, a shadow had come instead. She was just as swift and gentle in her care for all the things of every day, as efficient and painstaking, but she did not laugh, and the tiny lines that had characterized her father's blue eyes, began to show distinctly about her own.

They began to take on the look of great distances, as if she gazed far.

And for exactly three hours each day there could be heard the monotonous bark-bark-bark of the big guns Jim Last had given her in his final hour. To Billy Brent there was something terrible in this. Bred to violence and the quick disasters of the country as he was, he could not reconcile this grim practice with Tharon Last, the sane and loving girl who could not bear the sight of suffering.

"I tell you, Curly," he complained to his friend of nights when they came in and lounged in the soft dusk by the bunk-house, "it's unnatural.

Not that I don't pay full respect to Jim Last's memory, an' him th' best man in all this hell-bent Valley, but it ain't right an' natural fer no woman t' do what she's doin.' Ain't she Jim Last's own daughter already with th' guns? Sure. Can drive a nail nigh as far as he could. Quick as Wylackie Bob on th' draw an' as certain, now. Then why must she keep it up?"

Curly, more silent in his ways but given to thought, studied the stars that rode the darkening heavens and shook his head.

"Let her alone," he said once, "it was Last's command, an' he knew what he was about even if he was toppin' th' rise of the Big Divide.

"He said 'you'll have to pro—' you rec'lect? He meant *protect* an' unless I miss my guess, Billy, he'd have added '*yourself*' if th' hand of Ol' Man Death hadn't stopped his words. Somethin' happened out there in th' Cup Rim that day when Last got his that had to do with Tharon, an' he knew she'd be in danger. Let her alone."

So Billy let her alone, as did the rest. She went her ways, saw to the garden and made the butter in the cool springhouse, and sat in the window seat in the twilights. She liked to have the men come in as usual, but the talk these times was desultory, failing and brightening with forced topics, to fail again and drop into silence while

the dim red lights of the smokers glowed in the shadows.

Time and again she stirred and sighed, and they knew that once again she waited for Jim Last, listened for the clip-clap of El Rey coming home along the sounding ranges.

Once, on a night when there was no moon and the tree-toads sang in the cottonwoods by the spring, the girl, sitting so in the familiar window, suddenly dropped her head on her knees and sobbed sharply in the silence.

"Never again!" she said thickly from the folds of her denim skirt, "I'll never see him comin' home again!"

The riders stirred. Sympathy ached in their hearts, but not a man had speech to comfort her. It was Billy, the impulsive, who reached a hand to her shoulder and gripped it hard. Tharon reached up and touched the hand in gratitude.

It was about this time, when the master of Last's Holding had lain a month beneath the staring mound under the pine tree out to the east where they had buried Harkness, that José finished a work of art. For many days he had laboured secretly in a calf-shed out behind the small corrals, and in his slim dark fingers there was beauty unleashed. Finest carving he knew, since his forbears, peons across the Border, had spent

their lives upon the beams of the Missions. None had taught José. It was in his blood. Therefore, from a block of the hard grey stone of the region, which was almost like granite, he fashioned a cross, as tall as Tharon herself, struck it out free-hand and true, and set upon its austere face fine tracery of vines and Jim Last's name. He took into the secret Billy and Curly, since these two he was sure of, and together they hauled the huge thing out and set it up.

When Tharon, looking to the east with dawn, as was her habit, beheld this silent tribute to the man she had so loved, she leaned her forehead against the deep window-case and wept from the depths.

Then she went out to see it and with a knife she set her own mark thereon—a tiny cross scratched in the headpiece, another in the arm that stretched toward all that was mortal of poor Harkness.

"Two," she said, dry-eyed, while the glorious dawn shot up to bathe the world in glory, "full pay for you both."

. . . . . .

El Rey, stamping in his own corral, lifted his beautiful head, scanned the wide reaches that spread away in living green, and tossing up his

muzzle, sent out on the silence a ringing call. He cocked his silver ears and listened. No clear-cut human whistle answered him. Once more he called and listened.

Then he lowered his head and stepped along the fence. His great body, shining like blue satin with a silver frost upon it, gave and lifted with every step. The pastern joints above his striped hoofs were resilient as pliant springs. The muscles rippled in his shoulders, the blue-white cascade of his silver tail flowed to his heels, his mane was like a cloud upon the arch of his neck. He was strength and beauty incarnate, a monster machine of living might.

Unrest was upon him. Life had become stagnant, a tasteless thing. He was keen for the open stretches, honing to be gone down the wind. He fretted and ate out his heart for the freedom of the range. Old Anita, passing at some work or other, stopped and gazed at him for a compassionate moment.

"You, too, *grande caballo,*" she said, "there is naught but grief at Last's Holding. *Tharone querida*" she called into the house, "come here."

Tharon came and stood in the kitchen door.

"What, Anita?" she asked gently.

"El Rey," answered the old woman, "he calls and calls and none come to him. He, too, needs

help, *Corazon.* Why not take him for a run along the plain? It will help you both."

For a long time the girl stood, considering.

"I have not cared to ride lately, Anita," she said, "but you are right. El Rey should not be left to fret."

She stepped back in the house, then came out, and she had added nothing to her attire save her daddy's belt and guns. Without these she never left the Holding now.

Bareheaded, slender, she was a thing of beauty, and there was a quiet command about her which subdued the great El Rey himself, the proudest horse in all the Valley, outside of Courtrey's Ironwoods, Bolt and Arrow.

Between these three horses there was much comment and discussion, though they had never been tested out together.

She found a bridle on a corral post, a strong affair of rawhide, heavily ornamented with silver, its bit a Spanish spade. Without this she could not hold the stallion, and he was no pet to come at her caressing call of the double notes.

Only Jim Last himself had ever tamed El Rey to do his bidding by word of mouth. The horse had had one master. He would never have another.

Even now, when Tharon bridled him and

opened the big gate, promising him his long-desired flight, he seemed not to see her, his beautiful big eyes looked through, beyond her, as if he sought another. There was some one for whom he waited, listened.

From a block of wood set in the yard the girl gathered the rein tight in her hand, balanced a moment, and leaped up astride the shining back.

With a snort like a pistol shot El Rey flung up his great head, leaped into the air and was gone. Around the corner of the adobe house he went, out across the trampled yard, and away along the open to the south, running level and free. With the first sink-and-lift Tharon had slipped back a full span. Now she wound her fingers in the white cloud of mane that flailed her face and edged up, inch by inch. When her knees were well up on the huge shoulders that worked beneath them powerfully, she gathered the reins, one in each hand, leaned down along the outstretched neck and let the great king run. The wind sang by her ears in a rising whine, the green prairie was a flowing sea beneath her, the thunder of the pounding hoofs was stupendous music. Tharon shut her eyes and rode, and for the first time since Jim Last's death a sense of joy rose in her like a tide.

She had ridden El Rey before, many times. She

had felt him sail beneath her down the open prairies and always it was so, as if the earth slid by, as if the note of the wind lifted minute by minute. She had wondered often about this—how long it would continue to rise with El Rey's rising speed, how long before he would reach a maximum above which he could not go, a place where the singing note would remain fixed.

She had never known him reach that point. Always he could go faster. Always he had reserves.

Far out ahead she saw a bunch of cattle feeding. They were lazily circling in a wide arc, content under the beaming sun. Near them sat a rider on a buckskin horse, Bent Smith on Golden. This Golden was one of the prides of Last's Holding. Bigger than Drumfire or Redbuck, he ranked next to El Rey himself in speed, for his slim legs, slapped smartly with the distinguishing finger marks on the outside of the knee, were long and shapely, his back short-coupled and strong, his withers low, his narrow hips high. Tharon bore hard on El Rey's bit, leaned her body to the left, and they swung in toward Bent and Golden in a beautiful sweeping curve that brought the cowboy up in his stirrups with his hat a-wave above him.

"Good girl!" he yelled with leaping gladness

as the superb pair shot by. "Good girl! Go to it!"

Tharon loosed a hand long enough to wave back and was gone, on down the sloping land toward the country of the Black Coulee, her dark skirts fluttering at her knees, the two heavy guns pounding her thighs at every jump.

It was a long time before Ey Rey came down from his sweeping flight.

He had been too long holden in cramping bars. The free winds and the rolling earth filled him with a sort of madness. He ran with joy and the surety of unbounded power.

The rider, left far behind, watched them anxiously for a time, thought of following, glanced at his cattle, remembered the gun man's heritage and turned to his business.

The sun was well down over the western Rockface when Tharon and El Rey came back to Last's Holding. The riders were bringing in the cattle, dust was rising in clouds above the moving masses. From the ranch house came the savory smells of cooking.

The stallion was limber as a willow. He tossed his handsome head and his eyes were bright as stars set in his silver face. Life was at high tide in him, flowing magnificently. Tharon, her cheeks whipped into pulsing colour by the wind and the

NEAR THEM SAT A RIDER ON A BUCKSKIN HORSE

bounding speed, her tawny mane loosed from its bands and flying in a cloud behind her, smoothed back from her face, looked wild as an Indian. As she drew up and sat watching the work of the evening, she smiled for the first time in many days, and Jack Masters, passing, felt his heart leap with gladness.

When the mistress of Last's was sad, so were her people.

When the last big corral gate had swung to and the boys turned in to unsaddle, she touched El Rey with a toe and went over among them.

"Line up the horses, boys," she said, "I want to see them all together once more. Somethin' came back in me today—somethin' I been missing for a long time. I'll be myself again."

Billy turned Redbuck to face her, dropped his rein. Curly rode up on Drumfire. These two were red roans, dead matches. Bent brought Golden and stood him alongside. From far at the back of the corral they called Conford and Jack, who came wondering, the former on Sweetheart, true sister of El Rey, almost as big, almost as fast, almost as beautiful.

Silver-blue roan, silver-pointed, slim, graceful, springy, she had not a single dark spot on her except the sharp black bars of the finger marks outside her knees.

"You darlin'!" said Tharon as she wheeled in line.

Then came Jack on Westwind, and he was another buckskin, paler than Golden, most marvelously pointed in pure chestnut brown. His finger marks were brown instead of black—the only horse at the Holding so distinguished, for no matter of what shade or colour, in all the others these peculiar marks were jet black. Five splendid creatures they stood and pounded the ringing earth, tossed their heads and waited, though they had all been far that day and it was feeding time.

Out in the horse corrals there were many more of their breed, slim, wiry horses, toughened and hardened by long hours and daily work, but these were the flower of Last's, the prized favourites.

For a long time Tharon sat and watched them, noting their perfect condition, their glistening skins, their shining hoofs, many of which were striped, another characteristic.

"I don't believe," she said at last, "that there's a bunch of horses in Lost Valley to come nigh 'em. Ironwoods or anything else—I'd back th' Finger Marks."

"So would we," said Conford quietly, "though we've seen th' Ironwoods run—a little."

"That's th' word, Burt," said Curly, "a little.

Who of us has ever seen Courtrey let Bolt run like he wanted to? Not a darned one. I've seen that big bay devil pull till th' blood dripped from his mouth."

"Sure," put in Masters, "I've seen that, too—but I was lyin' up on th' Cup Rim oncet, watchin' a couple mavericks fer funny work, an' Courtrey an' Wylackie Bob come along down that way on Bolt an' Arrow—an' they wasn't a-holdin' them then. Lord, Lord, how they was goin'! Two long red streaks as level as your hand, an' I swear my heart came up in my throat to see 'em, an' I almost hollered. It was pretty work—pretty work, an' no mistake."

Tharon looked over at him.

"Fast as El Rey, Jack?"

"Who could tell?" said the man. "I know it was some speed, an' that is all."

The girl struck a hand on the king's shoulder so passionately that he jumped and snorted.

"Some day," she said tensely, "El Rey will run th' Ironwoods off their feet—an' I'll run th' heart out of their master, damn him! Put th' horses out. It's supper time."

She threw her right limb over the stallion's neck swiftly and with lithe grace, and slid abruptly to the ground.

As she did so there came the sound of hoofs on

the hard earth at the corner of the house, and a stranger came sharply into sight.

He drew up and nodded. Conford, just turning away, turned quickly back and came forward.

"Howdy," he said.

The man, tall, lean, dark, returned the salute with another nod.

He was covered with dust, as if he had ridden far and been a long time coming. His clothes were much the worse for wear, but they were mostly leather, which takes wear standing, as it were. The wide hat pulled low over his piercing dark eyes, was ornamented with a vanity of silver.

The riding cuffs at his wrists were studded profusely with the same metal, as was the wide belt that spanned his narrow waist.

He wore a three days' beard, and a black moustache dropped its long points to the edge of his jaw. Black hair showed beneath the hat. He was a remarkable figure, even in Lost Valley, and he commanded attention.

He carried the customary two guns of the country, and he bestrode a horse that was as noticeable as himself.

This horse was no denizen of Lost Valley. It was an utter alien. Its colour was a dingy black, as if it had recently been through fire, its coat rough and unkempt. Its long head was heavy and

slug-like, its nose of the type known among horsemen as Roman. It was roughly built, raw-boned and angular, and of so stupendous a size that the man atop, who was six foot tall himself, seemed small by comparison.

However, for all its ugliness, it possesed a seeming of vast power, a suggestion of great strength.

The stranger looked the group over with his keen, hard eyes, and spoke in a slow drawl.

"I reckon," he said, "I'm a-ridin' th' wrong trail. I hain't expected hyar."

And turning abruptly, without another word, he jogged away around the house and started down the long slope already greying with the coming night.

The foreman and the five punchers clamped over to the corner of the kitchen and watched him in speculative silence. Tharon came along and stood by Billy, her hand on the boy's arm. To Billy that sober touch confused the distances, set the strange rider dancing on the slope.

"H'm, said Conford, his grey eyes narrow, "come from far an's goin' somewheres. I'll watch that duck. He looks like he's a record man to me."

At supper there was much speculation about the stranger.

"I'll lay a month's pay he come from Texas," said Billy, casting a side glance at his pal Curly, "them long lankys usually do. An' somehow it shows in their eyes, sort o' fierce an'— "

"Billy," said Tharon severely, "if I was Curly I'd take a fall out of you. He can do it, *you* know that an' *I* know it."

"Thanks, Miss Tharon," said Curly in his soft Southern drawl, "if you feel that-a-way about it, w'y, I don't care what *no* little yellow-headed whipper-snapper from up Wyomin' way says to th' contrary."

Billy was a bit abashed, but he stubbornly supported his contention that the stranger was a bad-man from Texas.

"Plenty bad-men right here in Lost Valley," said the girl quietly, "an' th' breed ain't dyin' out as I can see. Th' settlers need a new leader—now that Jim Last's gone." And she fell to playing absently with her fork upon the cloth.

The boys changed the subject hurriedly.

"I found a dead brandin' fire in th' Cup Rim yesterday, Burt," said Masters, "quite a scrabbled space around it. Looked like some one'd branded several calves."

"Don't doubt it," said the foreman. "Careful as we are there's always likely to be stragglers.

An' to be a straggler's to be a goner in this man's land."

"Unless he belongs t' Last's," said the irrepressible Billy. "I'll lay that fer every calf branded by Courtrey's gang we'll get back two."

"Billy," said Tharon again, "Jim Last wasn't a thief. Neither will his people be thieves. For every calf branded by Courtrey, *one calf* wearin' th' J. L.—an' one calf only. We don't steal, but we won't lose."

"You bet your boots an' spurs throwed in, we won't," said the boy fervently.

As they rose from the table with all the racket of out-door men there came once more the sound of a horse's hoofs on the hard earth outside.

Last's Holding was a vast sounding-board. No one on horseback could come near without advertising his arrival far ahead.

This time it was no stranger. Tharon went to the western door to bid him 'light.

It was John Dement from down at the Rolling Cove. He was a thin, worn man, who looked ten years beyond his forty, his face wrinkled by the constant fret and worry of the constant loser.

Tonight he was strung up like a wire. His voice shook when he returned the hearty greetings that met him.

"Boys," he said abruptly, "an' Tharon—I come t' tell ye all good-bye."

"Good-bye! John, what you mean?"

Tharon went forward and put a hand on his arm. Her blue eyes searched his face.

The man stood by his horse and struck a tragic fist in a hard palm.

"That's it. I give up. I'm done. I'm goin' down the wall come day—me an' my woman an' th' two boys. Got our duffle ready packed, an' Lord knows, it ain't enough t' heft th' horses. After five year!"

There was the sound of the hopeless tears of masculine failure in the man's tragic voice. His fingers twisted his flabby hat.

"Hold up," said Conford, pushing nearer, "straighten out a bit, Dement. Now, tell us what's up."

"Th' last head—th' last hoof—run off last night as we was comin' in with 'em a leetle mite late. Had ben up Black Coulee way, an' it got dark on us. Just as we got abreast o' th' mouth of th' Coulee, where th' poplars grow, three men come a-boilin' out. They was on fast horses—o' course—an' right into th' bunch they went, hell-bent. Stampeded the hull lot. You know my bunch'd got down t' about a hundred head—don't know what I ben a-hangin' on fer, only a man hates

t' give up an' own hisself beat out. An' my woman—she's a fighter.

"She kep' standin' at my back like, oh, like—well, she kep' a-sayin' 'We'll win out yet, John, you see. Right'll win ev'ry time.' You see we are just ready to get th' patent on our land. She couldn't give that up, seems like. All this time gone an' nothin' gained. So we ben a-hangin' on when things went from bad to worse. Th' herd's been a-goin' down an' down. Calves with their tongues slit so's they'd lose their mothers—fed up in some coulee by hand an' branded. Knowed 'em by my own colour cattle, w'ich I drove in here five year ago—th' yellers.

"Mothers killed outright an' th' calves branded. Oh, I know it all—but what could I do? Kep' gettin' poorer an' poorer. Couldn't afford enough riders t' protect 'em. Then couldn't afford any an' tried t' make it go as th' boys got older. Courtrey, damn him, wants me offen that piece o' land a-fore th' patent's granted. Him with his twenty thousan' acres of Lost Valley now! An' how'd he get it? False entry, that's what! How many men's come in here, took up land, 'sold out' to Courtrey an' went? Or didn't go. A lot of 'em *didn't go*. We all know that. An' who dares to speak in a whisper about it? Th' men that did wouldn't go—never—nowheres."

There was the bitterness of utter defeat and hatred in the shaking voice. The tree-toads, beginning their nightly chorus from the wet places below the cottonwoods, emphasized the dreariness of the recital, the ancient hopelessness of the weak beneath the heel of the oppressor.

Dement ceased speaking and stood in silhouette against the last yellow-and-black of the dead sunset. The protruding apple in his hawk-like throat worked up and down grotesquely.

For a long moment there was utter silence.

Then he began again.

"I knowed I wasn't welcome in th' Valley when I hadn't ben here more'n six months. Th' first leetle string o' fence I put up fer corrals went down, mysterious, as fast as I could fix it. Th' woman's garden was broke open an' trampled to dust by cattle, drove in. Winter ketched us with mighty leetle t' eat in th' way o' truck. Next year she guarded it herself some nights, sleepin' by day, an' oncet she took a shot at some one that come prowlin' around. They let her fence alone after that, but what'd they do outside? Killed all th' hogs we had one night an' piled 'em in a heap in th' front door yard! That was hint enough, but I kep' a-thinkin' that ef we behaved decent like, an' minded our own business we sartainly must win out. We did," he added grimly after a

little pause, "like hell. An' how many others of th' settlers has gone through th' like? We ain't no tin gods ourselves, I own, but we got t' fight fire with fire. Only I ain't got no more light-wood," he finished quaintly, "I got to quit."

There was another silence while the tree-toads sang. Then the man held out his hand, hardened and warped with the unceasing toil of those tragic years.

"Good-bye, Tharon," he said, "I wisht Jim Last was here. With him gone Lost Valley's in Courtrey's hand an' no mistake. He was th' only man dared face him an' hold his own. Last's was th' only head th' weaker faction had, its master their only leader. While he lived we had some show, us leetle fellers. Now there ain't no leader. Th' ranchers'll go out fast now. It'll be a one-man valley."

In the soft darkness Tharon took the extended hand, held it a moment and laid her other one upon it.

"John Dement," she quietly said, "I want you to go home an' bar your house for fight. Fix up your fences, unpack your duffle. In the morning my riders will drive down to your place a hundred head o' cattle. You put your brand on 'em. There's goin' to be no one-man doin's in Lost Valley yet awhile—not while Jim Last's

daughter lives. See," she dropped his hand and pointed to the east where the tall pine lifted to the stars, "out yonder there's a cross at Jim Last's grave—an' there's my mark on it. Th' settlers have a leader still—an' I name myself that leader. I'm set against Courtrey, now an' forever. I mean to fight him t' th' last inch o' ground in Lost Valley, th' last word o' law, th' last drop o' blood, both his an' mine. You go down among 'em—th' settlers—an' take 'em that word from me. Tell 'em Jim Last's daughter stands facin' Courtrey, an' she'll need at her back t' fight him every man in Lost Valley that ain't a coward."

When the settler had gone, incoherent and half-incredulous, Conford drew a long breath and looked at his mistress in the dusk.

"Tharon, dear," he said so gently that his words were like a caress "you're jest a-breakin' your riders' hearts. You're heapin' anxiety on us mountain-high. Now what on earth'll we do?"

Young Billy Brent pushed near and slapped a hand against a doubled fist. His eyes were sparkling like harbour lights, his voice was like the sound of running fire.

"Do?" he cried. "Do? We'll stand behind her so tight they can't see daylight through, an' we'll fight with an' for her every inch o' that way,

every word o' that law, every drop o' that blood! Who says Last's ain't on th' map in Lost Valley?"

Tharon smiled and touched him again.

"Billy," she said softly, "you're after my own heart. Now get to bed. I want t' think."

CHAPTER III

THE MAN IN UNIFORM

SPRING was warming swiftly into summer. Where the gently sloping ranges went up in waves and swells toward the uplands at the east, the bright new green had turned to a darker shade. The tiny purple and white flowers had disappeared to give place to sturdier ones of crimson and gold. The veil of water that fell sharply down the face of the Wall for a thousand feet at the Valley's southern end had thinned to sheerest gauze. In the Cañon Country the snow had disappeared from most of the high points. Red, black, yellow, the great face of the encircling Wall stood in everlasting majesty, looking down upon the level cup of Lost Valley. The unspeakable upheaval of peaks and crags, of cañons and splits and unfathomable depths, was almost a sealed book to the denizens of the Valley. There were those who knew False Ridge.

There were those who said they knew more. Many a man had adventured therein, and few had returned to tell of their adventures. Cañon

Jim had not returned. Not that he was a loss to the community, or that they mourned him, but his absence pointed again to the formidable secretive power of the Cañon Country.

Tharon Last, standing in her western door, could look across the Valley's deceptive miles and see the huge black seams and fissures that rent the grim face. These splits and cañons were peculiar in that none came down to the Valley's floor, their yawning doorways being, in every instance, set from two hundred to five hundred feet up the Wall.

Often the girl watched them in the changing lights and her active mind formed many a conjecture concerning them.

"Some day," she told young Paula, "I'll go into the Cañon Country and see it for myself."

"Saints forbid, Senorita!" said Paula, who had no love for the mysterious, and who was more Mexic than Pomo, "there are demons and devils there!"

"Yes, I doubt not, Paula," said Tharon grimly. "They say Courtrey knows th' Cañons, an' when he's there, it's peopled, an' no mistake!

"But it must be beautiful—beautiful! Why—there's a thousand feet of crevasse on every hand, I know, steps an' benches an' weathered faces that no man can climb. They say there's bright waters

that tumble down like th' Vestal's Veil and sink into holes without an outlet. Just go away in the rock. There's strange flowers an' stunted trees. An' they tell of th' Cup of God, a hidden glade so beautiful that th' eye of man has never seen its like. All my life it's called me, th' Cañon Country.

"Don't you believe, Paula, that there's somethin' there for me? Some reason why I know I must some day go into its heart an' give myself up to it for a time? If I was free," she finished with a sigh, "if I was my own woman, wholly, I'd go soon. There's rest an' peace up there, I know—and a place to think of Jim Last without such bitterness that my heart turns t' gall."

She shook her bright head against the doorpost and shut her soft lips into a straight line.

"Nope," she finished sadly, "I ain't my own woman yet."

"Tharon," said Billy Brent this day, clanking around the corner of the adobe house, his leather chaps flapping with every step, his yellow hair curling boyishly under his hat-brim. "Tharon, I got bad news for you."

There was genuine distress in his grey eyes.

"Yes?" asked the mistress of Last's, straightening up.

"Yes, sir, an' I hate like hell t' tell it."

"Out with it, Billy. What's wrong?"

"Somebody's dynamited th' Crystal Spring in th' Cup Rim."

"*What?*"

The word was in italics. Its one syllable told all one might care to know of the importance of Billy's news.

"Yes. Opened her up fer two square yards. Spread th' lovely old Crystal all over th' range. An' she's gone, as sure's shootin'. Nothin' but a lot o' wet an' dryin' mud to show for her."

Tharon drew a long breath.

"Courtrey's beginnin'," she said. "He's heard th' word I sent th' settlers. He's goin' t' use th' tactics now with Last's that he's used with every poor devil he wanted to run out of th' Valley, th' tactics he darsent use while Jim Last lived. Well —go send Conford to me, Billy."

The girl sat down in the doorway and gazed sombrely out over the summer land.

When her foreman came and stood before her, a slim, efficient figure, dark-faced and quiet, she had already made up her mind.

"Burt," she said swiftly, "drive th' cattle down from th' Cup Rim right away. We'll run those two bunches under Blue Pine an' Nick Bob out toward th' Black Coulee. Tell 'em t' keep

close t' th' others. I trust th' Indians, but there ain't no Indian livin' can meet Courtrey's white renegades in courage an' wits. Then we'll start right in an' dig a well th' first well ever dug on th' open range in this man's land."

"Good Lord, Tharon!" said Conford, "A well!"

"Yes. Th' livin' water holes have been th' pride of th' Valley, I know, but we'll fix this well of ours so's even Courtrey will respect it."

There was a grim note in the golden voice.

"How?" asked Conford uneasily.

"Dig it first," said Tharon, "then I'll tell you."

What the mistress said, went. Therefore, the next morning saw a disgusted bunch of cowboys and Indian *vagueros* setting to with a will at a spot much nearer the Holding than the Crystal had been, and it took a much shorter time to reach water in a good gravel bed than any one had dreamed.

In three days the thing was done and Conford presented himself, smiling.

"Now, Miss Secrecy," he said, "come on with th' mystery."

Tharon went in to the big desk which Jim Last had used and which was now her own, and returned with a square white slab of pine, elaborately smoothed and finished by José.

"Read that," she said, and held it up, face out.

Printed neatly upon its shining surface, in the jet-black ink that old Anita made from the berries of a certain bush which grew at the foot of the cliffs across the Valley, were these words:

"This well is planted. I hope it blows up the first thief who tries to destroy it. Tharon Last."

Conford took the slab, scratched his head, holding his hat between thumb and finger, read it over, read it again, smiled, and then looked up.

"Might work," he said, "an' you're givin' out your stand an' knowledge broadcast, ain't you?"

"Certainly am," said Tharon briefly. "I said I'd fight, an' I want th' whole Valley t' know it."

"It does," said Conford with conviction. "I heard in Corvan yesterday that John Dement has rode th' range continuous since he finished brandin' his new herd to tell th' settlers about it."

"Good," said Tharon, "couldn't be better. There's got to be a change in Lost Valley sooner or later. Might as well be sooner."

And with that thought the girl let her quick mind sweep out to take in the future. She sent Conford off to post her placard and herself went rummaging among the possibilities which her defy had placed before her. She knew that Courtrey would be coldly furious. He had lived his life

as suited him, had taken what and where he listed, by fair means or foul, and though every soul in the Valley knew him and his methods, none had spoken the convicting word. It was the pen-stroke at the end of the death-warrant to do so.

She knew that the faction of the settlers hated him and his with a vitriolic passion, that they were in the minority, that they were no tin gods themselves, and that they were being beaten out, one by one.

Year by year Courtrey had added to his vast acreage, and it was a matter of common knowledge how he had done it. He was rich, powerful, bullying, a man whose self-aggrandizement knew no limit, whose merest whim was his law, whose will must not be thwarted. Year by year his *vaqueros* drove down the Wall herds of fat cattle, their brands blurred, insolently raw and careless. Many a hapless man had stood and seen his own stock go by in Courtrey's band and dared not open his mouth. In fact Courtrey had been known to stop and chat with such a one, smiling his evil smile and enjoying the helpless chagrin of his victim.

"Insolent ruffian!" muttered Tharon this day, frowning above her daddy's pipes on the desk top. "He's goin' t' get one run for his money

from now till one of us is whipped. It may be me, but I'll leave my mark on him, so help me!

"Straight killin's too good for him. I want to smash him first."

"Tharon, mi *Corazon,*" said Anita, stopping soft-foot beside her, "it is bad for one to talk so, to himself. The Evil One works on the mind that way."

Tharon laughed.

"Perhaps, Anita," she said shortly, "it is with the Evil One I have t' do, an' no mistake."

The old woman crossed herself and went away, her wrinkled face dim with care. And Tharon dressed herself neatly, put a ribbon on her hair, set her wide hat carefully on her head, buckled on her heavy gun-belt, and went to the corral for El Rey. Her daddy's saddle was her own now, a huge affair carved and ornamented, profusely studded with silver.

Along the right side below the pommel ran a darker stain, Jim Last's blood, set before his daughter like a star.

She mounted the silver stallion and went away down along the summer land, a shaft of light shooting through the green of the ranges.

Far over to her left she could see her cattle, beautiful bunches spread like figures in a tapestry.

The figures of her riders were small dots on the outskirts.

El Rey, always hard on the bit, always strong-headed, wanted to run and she swung loose her rein and let him go. But run as he might, there was always in his speed that rising note, that seeming of reserve power.

She passed the head of Black Coulee, swung out across the edge of Rolling Cove, thundered down to the ford of the Broken Bend. Here she let the stallion drink, deep draughts that would have slowed a lesser horse. El Rey went up the bank beyond the ford like a charging engine, squared away and stretched out to finish his run. He was within three miles of Corvan, set like a stone in a smooth green surface, before he came down and lifted his shoulders into his gait. With the first rock and swing of the singlefoot, Tharon smiled and settled herself more comfortably in the saddle. This was joy to her, this beautiful syncopation, this poetic marked time that reeled off the miles beneath her and would scarcely have shaken a pebble from her hat-brim.

As she struck the outskirts of the little town the unmistakable sound of El Rey's iron-shod hoofs brought heads into doors, children at the house corners to look upon her. She came down the main street at a smart clip, to bring up with

a slide at the hitch-rail before Baston's store where the monthly mail was handled. There were horses tied there, and among them she saw what caused her to look twice with a narrowing of her keen eyes—a huge, raw-boned, black, rusty and slug-headed, among the Ironwood bays from Courtrey's Stronghold.

"H'm," she told herself quietly, "so there's where he was expected."

She tied El Rey to himself, far from the rest, for she knew his imperious temper and that trouble would ensue if he was near strange horses.

Then she went into Baston's with her meal-sack on her arm. This meal-sack was a part of her accoutrement, a regular carry-all for such small purchases as she must take home—a roll of print for Paula, some tobacco for the men, a dozen spools of the linen thread which was so much prized among the women of Lost Valley.

As she stepped in the open door her quick glance went over the big room with a comprehensiveness which catalogued its inmates accurately and instinctively. Courtrey was not there, though his great bay, Bolt, stood outside. However, Wylackie Bob was there. This man, sitting at a canvas covered table in a corner, idly fingering a pack of cards, was not one to be passed over easily. He was notorious.

Tall, slow of action, sleepy-eyed, he was treacherous as a snake, as swift to move when necessary. He had been known to sit as he was now, idly playing, to leap up, crouch, draw and kill a man, and be down again at his place, idly playing, before the breath was done in his victim.

He was a past-master of his gun, and unlike most men of the time and place, he carried only one.

He was a quarter-blood Wylackie Indian. Near him sat the stranger who had ridden the slug-head black into Lost Valley. They both looked up as the girl entered and regarded her with smiles.

Tharon did not look at them again. She saw, however, that they were together, of one interest. There were two or three of the settlers in the store, Jameson from over under the Rock-face at the south, Hill from farther up, Thomas from Rolling Cove. She spoke to these men quietly and noticed with an inward thrill the eagerness with which they responded.

There was an electric something between them which told her that her promise had, indeed, gone up and down the country, that in a subtle, unheralded manner she stood in Jim Last's place, a head, a leader.

She made her purchases without undue speech,

got two letters in her father's name—and these brought a smarting under her eyelids—tied up her sack and went out without so much as a glance at the two men in the corner. Laughter followed her, however, which set the red blood of anger pulsing in her cheeks.

At the end of the store porch she came face to face with Courtrey and Steptoe Service, the sheriff of Menlo county. She swung to one side to descend the rough steps, vouchsafing them no word or look, but Service blocked her way. She raised her eyes and looked him full in the face, scanning his coarse red features coolly.

"Well?" she said sharply.

"What's this I hear, Tharon?" asked Service, "about you a-makin' threats?"

"What have you heard?" she wanted to know.

"W'y, that you're a-makin' threats."

"Yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

The sheriff flushed darker.

"Look here, young woman,"—he raised his voice suddenly and on the instant there was a sound of boots on the store floor and the settlers, the two men in the corner, Baston and two clerks came crowding out to hear, "you look a-here—

don't you know it's a-gin th' law for any one t' make a threat like you done, open an' above board, in th' Golden Cloud th' other night?"

Tharon shifted the meal-sack higher on her left arm. Courtrey's eyes went down to her right hand and stayed there.

The girl's upper lip lifted from her teeth in a sneer that was the acme of insult. The fire was beginning to play in her blue eyes.

"Law?" she said. "My God! Law!"

"Yes, *law!* you young hussy, an' don't you fergit that I represent it."

The girl threw down the sack and flashed both hands on the gun-butts. Courtrey, watching, was half-a-second behind her and stopped with his hands hovering.

"Not much, Courtrey," she said, "you fast gun man! You're too slow. An' this ain't your game, anyway, not face t' face. You're all right on a dark night—*an' from behind.* Fine! But you're a coward. You're what I called you before—as assassin."

She was pale as ashes, her eyes narrowed to blazing slits. Jim Last, gun man, was in her like those composite pictures which show the shadow in the substance. There was a gasp from the store porch where Thomas stood with a shaking hand covering his lips. Baston was stuck against

his wall like a leech, rigid. These men knew that she tempted death.

Not a man in Lost Valley could have done it and gotten away with it.

Tharon knew it, too, but she did not care.

"An' now you know what you are, Courtrey. I'll tell th' same to you, Step Service. Law! In Lost Valley? Yes, Courtrey's law! Th' law of th' gun alone—th' law of thieves—th' law of murderers. An' you stand for that, you bet! What were you before you took th' oath of office? Tell me that! Th' man who killed old Mike McCrea an' took his cattle down th' Wall! Th' whole Valley knows it—but we've never dared to say it before!"

The porch was lined with people now. Soft-footed Indians and Mexican *vaqueros,* sprung from nowhere, cowboys, ranchers, women, they came silently up and listened.

The sheriff's red face was the colour of liver, purple and mottled with bursting rage. His fingers worked at his sides. He set his lips, and his small eyes never left the girl's face.

Tharon, crouched a bit, her feet apart, her elbows crooked above her hips, her fingers curled on her gun-butts with nice precision, wet her own pale lips and continued:

"An' who put you in office? That laugh of an

office! Who? Why, Courtrey—th' biggest thief, th' coldest murderer in th' country! *He* put you there! An' what are you good for? My daddy was shot—*in th' back*—an' did you make one inquiry into the murder? Come out to Last's, even to find a clew? Not you! There's only one sheriff in this Valley—one bit o' law that will avenge his death—an' that's *me!* Now, you two fine gentlemen—I'm goin'. There's my hand! I throw th' cards on th' table! Shoot me in the back if you've got th' nerve. Come out in th' open an' fight! *But you better be quick about it!"*

With that she backed slowly along the porch, keeping them in view.

"Get away behind me," she called. There was a path opened instantly, the sound of shuffling feet. Along the porch she went, step by step, stopping every moment or so to keep close hold on her advantage, every nerve strained, every one of her faculties at the top of its power.

She felt for the step with her foot, went down, backed through the crowd, brought them all in the range of the guns which she flashed out now and held upon them.

She was ashy pale, a flaming, vibrant thing. Not a man there but knew she was more dangerous at the moment than cool Jim Last had ever been, for she radiated hatred of her father's killer

in every bitter glance. She had none for whom to be cautious. She was the last of her blood. She was efficient, and she knew it.

Courtrey knew it, and felt the sweat start on his skin.

Service knew it, and hated her for it.

As the girl backed clear there came into her vision a strange figure—the straight, trim figure of a man who stood stiffly at attention, where her imperious words had caught him.

He wore a uniform of semi-military style, leather leggings, a flannel shirt of butternut and a smart, tan, broad-brimmed hat.

He, too, came in the range of the travelling guns and waited their pleasure.

Tharon reached El Rey. She stuck her right-hand weapon in its holster, loosed the rein, flung it over the stallion's head, stepped around his shoulder and mounted deftly and swiftly from the wrong side. It was a pretty trick of horsemanship and showed up her adroitness. As El Rey rose on his hind feet, whirling, that unwavering muzzle whirled also, to keep in line. The king struck into his gait and his rider, facing backward, swung away down the narrow street. Until she was well out of range the tension held.

Then Steptoe Service struck a fist into a palm

and began to swear in a fury, but Courtrey laughed, one of his rare, short bursts of mirth that were more bodeful than oaths.

He turned on his heel and strode back the way he had come.

The stranger in the uniform walked forward, went up the steps, crossed the porch, and, stooping, picked up the meal-sack which Tharon had dropped.

"Will some one kindly tell me who the young lady is and where she lives?" he asked gravely.

Baston, unglued from the wall, spoke up with his usual pompous eagerness.

"Tharon, from Last's Holdin'," he said.

"Thanks," and the man wrapped the sack into a small bundle and tied it with its own string.

He stuck it under one arm and taking out a short brown pipe, proceeded to fill and light it.

Courtrey, halted a few rods away, eyed him sharply.

As he turned, rolling his match to death in his fingers, the sun struck mellowly upon something on his breast, a small, dark copper shield which bore strange heraldry.

At the sight Courtrey's eyes sought Service's and held them for a swift, questioning moment.

Strangers in Lost Valley were contraband.

The three settlers looked covertly at each other,

drifted apart, got their horses and presently left town by different ways.

Three hours later these men met by common consent at the head of Rolling Cove and talked long and earnestly of the happening. They knew that Courtrey would never take silently that bitter arraignment, that something would transpire swiftly to show his resentment, to prove his absolute power over Lost Valley.

"'Tain't Tharon that'll suffer, even ef he did try t' shoot her that night in th' Golden Cloud, because Courtrey wants her himself," said Jameson quietly, "th' whole country knows that. There was only one man who didn't know it, an' that was Jim Last himself. No, he won't monkey with th' Holdin' yet, not to any great extent. It'll be us little fellers, us others who he knows would stan' behind her. Some of us'll lose somethin' soon, an' don't you forget it."

"If we do," said Hill passionately, "it's time t' show our hand. We've been hounded long enough. Th' men from Last's will be with us, we can gamble on that."

"Yes," said Thomas, "but it'll be war. Open war. There'll be killin's then."

Jameson, a quiet man with deep eyes, made a wide gesture.

"What if there is?" he asked, "might's well be

done in th' open as in th' dark an' unseen. Might better be! I move we ride th' Valley an' ask th' settlers to band together, under Last's, an' give our ultimatum t' Courtrey on th' heels of this. What say you?"

"I say yes," said Hill swiftly. Thomas, of less stern stuff, wavered.

"Well, let's wait awhile. Let's don't be too quick. Courtrey now, he's mighty quick an' hot. They ain't no tellin'——"

"All right," said Jameson promptly, "suit yourself—we ain't a-pressin' no man into this."

"Why, now, I'm fer it, boys—that is, I'm believin' it's got t' be done, only I counsels time."

"No time," cried Hill, "we ben counselin' time an' quiet an' not doin' anything to stir 'em up, an' what d' we get? Cattle stole every spring, waterholes taken an' fenced fer Courtrey's stock right on th' open range, hogs drove off, fences tore down, like pore old John Dement's an' some of us left t' rot every year in some coulee. We done waited a sight too long. Courtrey thinks he owns Lost Valley, an' he comes near doin' it, what with his hired killers, Wylackie an' Black Bart an' this new gun man that's just come in. I heered today he's from Arizona, an' imported article."

Jameson turned to him and held out his hand.

"I'm goin' to ride tomorrow," he said.

Hill grasped the extended hand and looked hard in the other's eyes.

"Me, too," he said.

Thomas, still of the timid, doubting heart, watched them with a hand over his mouth to hide its shaking.

Without a word the others turned their horses and rode away in different directions. As they went farther from him in the wash of the late light the uncertain hand came down with a jerk. Fear was in his eyes, the deep, quaking fear of the man poor in courage, but he beat it down.

"Boys!" he cried in a panic, "don't leave me out! For God's sake, don't think I ain't willin'! I'll be out come day tomorrow!"

The others both stopped and turned in their saddles.

"Glad to hear ye come through, Thomas," called Jameson, "you ride south along th' Rock-face. You'll go over Black Coulee way, won't ye, Dan?"

"I will," said Hill.

"Good. I'll go north."

There was a quiet grimness in the few words, for he who rode north on such an errand tempted fate.

Then the three separated, and there was only

the silence and the red light of the dying day at the head of Rolling Cove.

That same evening Tharon Last sat in her western doorway and watched the sun go down in majesty over the weathered peaks and ridges of the Cañon Country.

Billy Brent lounged on the hard earth beside the step, his fair head shining in the afterglow, his grey eyes upon the girl's face in a sort of idol-worship.

The curve of her cheek, golden with tan and red with the hue of youth, was more to him than all the sunsets the world had ever seen.

A deep light shone in his young eyes which, had the girl been wise, she might have seen. But Tharon was as elemental as the kitten chasing a moth out by the pansy bed, and could look in a man's face with the unconscious eyes of a child.

Now she watched the pageant of the dying day in a rapt delight.

"Billy," she said presently, "I've often wondered if there's another place in all the world as lovely as our Valley. Jim Last told me once that there were places so much bigger out below, that we wouldn't be a patchin' to them. Don't seem like there could be."

She lifted her slim body up along the door-post and looked long and earnestly all up and down the

wonderful stretch of country that lay along the Wall from north to south. She could see the tiny dots that went for the different homesteads, scattered here and there. Up at the head there lay, hard against the frowning hills, the squat, wide blur that was Courtrey's Stronghold. Her lips compressed at sight of it.

"Nope," she said, shaking her head, "I don't believe he meant it. He used to tease me a lot, you know. It's an awful big valley, an' no mistake."

The rider, who had drifted up along the Wall five years before, looked down at the playing kitten and smiled with a lean crinkling of his cheeks.

"It's a sure-enough big place, Tharon," he said gravely, "an' it's lovely as Eden."

"Huh?" said Tharon, "where's that, Billy?"

The boy sobered and looked up into her blue eyes.

"Why, Tharon," he whispered, "that's where th' heart is."

For a moment she regarded him. Then she smiled.

"Billy," she said severely, "you're stringin' your boss. I'm sure goin' to fire you, some day, like I ben a-threatenin'."

"Do—an' hire me over!"

"Nope."

The girl shut her pretty lips and the man's hand crept softly up and touched her wrist where it lay against her knee.

"All right," he said airily, "gimme my time. I quit."

There was an odd note in his voice, as if under the play there was a purpose. For a second Tharon held her breath.

"What you mean, Billy?" she asked so sharply that the boy jumped.

Then he laughed, still in that light fashion.

"What I said," he affirmed doggedly.

But the mistress of Last's took a clutch on his hand that was authority in force and leaned down to look anxiously in his face.

"Why, Billy," she said with a quiver in her voice, "Last's couldn't run without you, boy. An' what's more, I thought all th' riders of th' Holdin' would stand by th' place.

Billy, fully sobered, straightened up and held hard to that clutching hand. The red light of the sunset flushed his cheeks, but it never set the glow that was in his eyes.

"Don't you know yet, Tharon," he said quietly, "when I'm a-jokin' with you? I'd stand by Last's an' you to my last breath. Don't you know that?"

For a long moment Tharon regarded him gravely.

"Yes, I do," she said, "but somehow I don't like to have you talk that-a-way, Billy. Don't do it no more."

"All right," promised the rider, "if you say so, Boss. Only don't talk about firin' me, then. I'm very sensitive."

And he looked away with smiling eyes to where the deep black shadows fell prone into the Valley from the forbidding face of the great Wall.

Only the towering peaks were alight with crimson and gold, which haloed their bulk in majestic mystery.

Night was coming fast across Lost Valley, while the tree-toads out by the springhouse set up their nightly chorus.

"It's Eden," thought the man, "as sure's th' world, made an' forgot with all its trimmin's—innocence an' sweetness an' plenty, an' th' silence of perfect peace, not to overlook th' last unnecessary evil, th' livin' presence of his majesty, th' devil."

Then the light died wholly and there came the disturbing sound of boots on the ringing stones. The rest of the riders were coming in to claim their share of Billy's Eden.

CHAPTER IV

UNBROKEN BREAD

JAMESON, Hill and Thomas were as good as their word. During the week that followed the spectacular denouncement of Courtrey and Service at Baston's store, they went quietly to every settler in the Valley and declared themselves. In almost every instance they met with eager pledges of approval. They knew, every man of them, that this slow banding together for resistance against Courtrey and his power meant open war. For years they had suffered indignities and hardship without protest. While Jim Last lived they had had a sort of leader, an example, though they had feared to follow in his lead too strongly.

They had copied his methods of guarding possessions, of corraling every cattle-brute at night, of keeping every horse under bars. Last had looked Courtrey in the face. The rest dared not.

Now with Last gone, they felt the lack, as if a bastion had been razed, leaving them in the open. Secrecy in Lost Valley had been brought to a work of art. They could hold their tongues.

But with the new knowledge Tharon Last took on a light, a halo.

Men spoke in whispers about her daring. They felt it themselves.

Word of her lightning quickness with her daddy's guns, of her accuracy, went softly all about and about, garbled and accentuated. They said she could shoot the studs from the sides of a man's belt and never touch him. They said she could drive a nail farther than the ordinary man could see. They said she could draw so swiftly that the motion of the hands was lost.

A slow excitement took the faction of the settlers.

But out at Last's Holding a grave anxiety sat upon Tharon's riders. Conford knew—and Billy knew—and Curly knew more about Courtrey's intent than some of the others. Young Paula, half asleep in the deep recesses of the house, had witnessed that furious encounter by the western door on the soft spring day when Jim Last had come home to die at dusk. She knew that the look in Courtrey's eyes had been covetousness—and she had told José. José, loyal and sensible, had told the boys. So now there was always one or more of them on duty near the mistress of Last's on one pretext or another. To Tharon, who knew more than all of them put together, this was funny.

It stirred the small mirth there was in her these days, and often she sent them away, to have them turn up at the most unexpected times and places.

"You boys!" she would say whimsically, "you think Courtrey's goin' to cart me off livin'?"

"That's just what we are afraid of, Tharon," answered Conford gravely once, "we know it'd not be *livin'*."

And Tharon had looked away toward José's cross, and frowned.

"No," she said, "an' it won't be any way, *livin'* or dead."

One night toward the end of that week a strange cavalcade wound up along the levels, past the head of Black Coulee, forded the Broken Bend in silence save for the stroke of hoof and iron shoe on stone, and went toward Last's. There were thirty men, riding close, and they had nothing to say in the darkness.

At the Holding Tharon Last waited them on her western doorstep.

As they rode in along the sounding-board the muffled ringing of the hoofs seemed to the girl as the call of clarions. The heart in her breast leaped with a strange thrill, a gladness. She felt as if her father's spirit stood behind her waiting the first step toward the fulfillment of her promise.

The riders stopped in the soft darkness. There

was no moon and the very winds seemed to have hushed their whispers in the cottonwoods.

"Tharon," said the man who rode in the lead, and she recognized the voice of Jameson from the southern end of the Valley, "we've come."

That was all. A simple declaration, awaiting her disposal.

Conford, not half approving, his heart heavy with foreboding, stood at his mistress' shoulder and waited, too.

For a long moment there was no sound save the eternal tree-toads at their concert. Then the girl spoke, and it seemed to those shadowy listeners that they heard again the voice of Jim Last, sane, commanding, full of courage and conviction.

"I'm glad," said Tharon simply, "th' time has come when Lost Valley has got t' stand or fall forever. Courtrey's gettin' stronger every day, more careless an' open. He's been content to steal a bunch of cattle here, another there, a little at a time. Now he's takin' them by th' herds, like John Dement's last month. He's got a wife, an' from what I've always heard, she's a sight too good fer him. But he wants more—he wants *me*. He's offered me th' last insult, an' as Jim Last's daughter I'm a-goin' to even up my score with him, an' it's got three counts. You've all got scores against him."

Here there were murmurs through the silent group.

"Th' next outrage from Courtrey, on any one of us, gets all of us together. For every cattle-brute run off by Courtrey's band, we'll take back one in open day, all of us ridin'. We'll have to shoot, but I'm ready. Are you?"

Every man answered on the instant

"Then," said the girl tensely, "get down an' sign."

There was a rattle of stirrups and bits, a creak of leather as thirty men swung off their horses.

Tharon stepped back in the lighted room. Her men stood there against the walls. The settlers came diffidently in across the sill, lean, poor men for the most part, their strained eyes and furrowed faces showing the effect of hardships. Not a man there but had seen himself despoiled, had swallowed the bitter dose in helplessness.

Most of them were married and had families. Some of them had killings to their record. Many of them were none too upright.

Jameson was a good man, and so was Dan Hill. Thomas was merely weak. Buford was a gun man who had protected his own much better than the rest. McIntyre was like him. One by one they came forward as Tharon called them by name, and leaning down, put their names or their

marks to a sheet of paper which bore these few simple lines:

"We, the signers named below, do solemnly promise and pledge ourselves to stand together, through all consequences of this act, for the protection of our lives and property. For every piece of property taken from any one of us, we shall go together and take back it, or its worth, from whoever took it. For every person killed in any way, but fair-and-open, we promise to hang the murderer."

Billy had drafted the document. Tharon, whom Jim Last had taught her letters, read it aloud. The names of Last's Holding headed it. The thirty names and marks—and of the latter there were many—stretched to the bottom of the sheet.

When it was done the girl folded it solemnly and put it away in the depths of the big desk. Old Anita, watching from the shadows of the eating room beyond, put her *reboso* over her head and rocked in silent grief. She had seen tragic things before.

Then these lean and quiet men filed out, mounted the waiting horses and went away in the darkness, mysterious figures against the stars.

That night Tharon Last sat late by the deep window in her own room at the south of the

ranch house. It was a huge old room, high walled and sombre. There were bright blankets hung like pictures on the walls, baskets marvelously woven of grass and rushes, thick mats on the floor made in like manner and of a tough, long-fibred grass that grew down in a swale beyond the Black Coulee, while in one corner there shone pale in the darkness the one great treasure of that unknown mother, an almost life-size statue of the Holy Virgin.

Of this beautiful thing Tharon had stood in awe from babyhood.

A half fearful reverence bowed her before it on those rare times when Anita, throwing back to her Mexic ancestors, worshipped with vague rites at its feet.

Always its waxen hands bore offerings, silent tribute from the girl's still nature. Sometimes these were the prairie flowers, little wild things, sweet and fragile. Sometimes they were sprays of the water vines that grew by the wonderful spring of the Holding.

Again they were strings of bright beads, looped and falling in glistening cascades over the tarnished gilt robes of the Virgin.

Under the deep window there was a wide couch, piled high with a narrow mattress of wild goose feathers and covered with a crimson blanket.

Here the girl sat with her arms on the sill and looked out into the darkness that covered the Valley. She thought of the thirty men who had signed her paper, riding far and by in the sounding basin, returning to their uncertain homes. She thought of her father asleep under his peaceful cross, of young Harkness beside him.

She thought of Courtrey and Service and Wylackie Bob, of Black Bart and the stranger from Arizona. They were a hard bunch to tackle.

They had the Valley under their thumbs to do with as they pleased, like the veriest Roman potentate of old. Her daddy had told her once, when she was small and lonely of winter nights, strange old tales of rulers and their helpless subjects. Jim Last could talk when he needed, though he was a man of conserved speech.

Yes, Courtrey was like a king in Lost Valley, absolute. She thought of the many crimes done and laid to his door since she could remember, of countless cattle run off, of horses stolen and shamelessly ridden in grinning defiance of any who might dare to identify them, of Cap Hart killed on the Stronghold's range and left to rot under the open skies, a warning like those birds of prey that are shot and hung to scare their kind. Her soft lips drew themselves into a hard line, very like

Jim Lost's, and the heart in her ratified its treaty with the thirty men.

She had come to mourn her, she thought a trifle sadly—well Anita and Paula, of course, and there were her riders. Billy would grieve—he'd kill some one if she were killed—and Conford and Jack.

A warm glow pervaded her being. Yes, she had folks, even if she was the last of her blood.

But she didn't intend to be killed. She was right, and she had listened enough to Anita to believe with a superstitious certainty, that right was invulnerable. For instance, if she and Courtney should draw at the same second, she believed absolutely, that because she was in the right, her bullet would travel a bit the swifter, her aim be truer. She felt in her heart with a profound conviction that some day she would kill Courtney. She thought of his wife, Ellen, a pale flower of a woman, white as milk, with hair the colour of unripe maize, and wondered if she loved the man who made her life hell, so the Valley whispered. Tharon wondered how it would seem to love a man, as women who were wives must love their men—if the agony of loss to Ellen could be as acute and terrifying as hers had been ever since that soft night in spring when her best friend, Jim Lost, had come home on El Rey.

She thought of the grey look on his face, of the pinched line at his nostrils' base, and the tears came miserably under her lids, she laid her head on the cloth mat that covered the wide window ledge and wept like any child for a time. Then she wiped her face with her hands, sighed, and fell again to thinking.

An hour later as she rose to make ready for bed, she thought she caught a faint sound out where the little rock-bordered paths ran in what she was pleased to call her garden, since a few hardy flowers grew by the spring's trickle, and she held her breath to listen. It was nothing, however, she thought, and turned into the deep room.

Only the tree-toads, long since silent, knew that a cigarette, carefully shielded in a palm, glowed in the darkness.

Two days after this a visitor came to Last's. From far down they saw him coming, in the mid-morning while the work of the house went forward. Paula, bringing a pan of milk from the springhouse spied him first and stopped to satisfy her young eyes with the unwonted appearance of him. She looked long, and hurried in to tell her mistress.

"Señorita," she said excitedly, "see who comes!

A stranger who has different clothes from any other. He rides not like Lost Valley men, either, being too stiff and straight. Come, see."

And Tharon, busy about the kitchen in her starched print dress, dropped everything at once to run with Paula to the western door of the living room that they might look south.

"*Muchachas* both," complained old Anita, "the milk is spilled and the *pan dulce* burns in the oven! Tch, tch!"

But the young creatures in the west door cared naught for her grumbling.

"Who can it be, to come so, Señorita?" wondered Paula, her brown cheek beside her mistress, "is he not handsome!"

"For mercy sake, Paula," chided Tharon laughing, "I believe you'd look for beauty in th' ol' Nick himself if he rode up. But I've seen this man before."

"Where? When?"

"In town that day I met Courtrey an' Service. I remember seein' him come into line as I backed out—he was standin' between th' racks an' th' porch, somewhere." And she narrowed her eyes and studied the rider as he came jogging up across the range.

"H'm," she said presently, "he does ride

funny. I bet he ain't rode range much in *his* life. Stiff as a ramrod, an' no mistake."

Then with an unconscious grace and poise that set well upon her as the mistress of Last's, Tharon moved into the open door and waited.

As the stranger came closer both girls subjected him to a frank and careful scrutiny that in any other place than Lost Valley would have been rudeness itself.

Here it catalogued the stranger, set the style of his welcome.

It left him stripped of surprise, outwardly, before he was within speaking distance.

It told the observers that he was young, of some twenty-six or seven, that his face, the first point taken in with lightning swiftness—was different from most faces they had ever seen, that it was open, smiling, easy, that he was straight as a ramrod, indeed, that he rode as if he feared nothing in the earth or the heavens, that he carried no gun, that he wore the peculiar uniform that Tharon had noticed before, and that there was something on his breast, a dark shield of some sort which made them think of Steptoe Service and his disgraced sheriff's star. This thought brought a frown to Tharon's brows, and it was there to greet the stranger when he rode up to the step and halted, his smart tan hat in his hand. The morn-

ing sun burned warmly down on his dark hair, which was brushed straight back from his forehead in a way unknown in those parts. His dark eyes, slow and deep but somehow merry, took in the pretty picture in the door.

"Miss Last?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," said Tharon promptly and waited.

Every one waited in Lost Valley for a stranger to make known his business. Paula drew back behind her mistress.

The man sat still on his horse and waited, too. The silence became profound. The hens cackling about the barns intruded sharply.

"Well," he said presently, "I am a stranger, and I came to see you."

The girl in the doorway felt a hot surge of discomfort flare over her for the first time in her life for such a reason.

There was something in the low voice that implied a lack, accused her of something. She resented it instantly.

"If that is so," she said slowly, "light."

The man laughed delightedly, and swung quickly down, dropping his rein. Tharon noticed that. That much was natural. He held his hat against his breast with one hand and came forward with the same quickness, holding out the other. Tharon was not used to shaking hands

with strange men. She gave her hand diffidently, because he so evidently expected it, and took it away swiftly.

"My name," he said, "is Kenset—David Kenset, and I am from Washington, D. C."

He might as well have said Timbuctoo. Tharon Last knew little outside her own environment. Words and names that had to do with unknown places were vague things to her.

"Yes?" she answered politely, "I make no doubt you've come far. Come in. Dinner'll soon be ready," and she moved back from the door with a smile that covered her pitiful ignorance as with a garment of gold. When Tharon smiled like that she was wholly adorable, and the man knew it at once.

Why she had so quickly invited him in before he had fully declared himself, she did not know, unless it was because of that lack in her which his first words had implied.

Old Anita, whose manners were the simple and perfect ones of the Mexican coupled to a kindly heart, had taught her how to comport.

Her easy and constant association with the riders and *vaqueros* had dulled her somewhat, but she could be royal on occasion.

Now she simply stepped back in the deep cool room where the *ollas* swung in the windows, smiled

—and she was changed entirely from the girl of a few moments before.

The man came in, laid his hat on the flat top of the melodeon, walked over to a chair and sat down. There was an ease about him, a taking-for-granted, that amazed Tharon beyond words.

Then he looked frankly at her and began to talk as if he had known her always.

"I've come to live in Lost Valley, Miss Last," he said, "for a long while, I think. Wish me luck."

"Come here to live?" said Tharon, "a settler? Goin' to homestead?"

He shook his head.

"No."

A quick suspicion seized her. Perhaps Washington was like Arizona, a place from which they imported gun men. Only this man wore no gun, and he had not a look of prowess. No. This man was different.

"Then what you goin' to do?" she asked as frankly as a child.

"First," he said, "I'm going up where the pines grow yonder and build myself a house," and he waved a hand toward the east where the ranges rolled up to the thickening fringes of the forest that marched back into the ramparts of the trailless hills.

"I want to find an ideal spot, a glade where the pines stand round the edges, with a spring of living water running down, and where I can look down and over the magnificent reaches of Lost Valley. I shall make me a home, and then I shall work."

"Ride?" asked the girl succinctly.

"Ride? Of course, that will be a great part of that work."

"Who for?"

He looked at her sharply.

"Who for?"

"Yes. What outfit?"

There was a hard quality in her voice. If he had come in to ride for Courtrey, why he must know at once that Last's was no friend of his, now or ever.

He caught the drift of her thought in part.

"For no outfit, Miss Last," he said with a gentle dignity. "I am in the employ of the United States Government."

A swift change came over Tharon's face.

Government!

That was no word to conjure by in Lost Valley. Steptoe Service prated of Gov'ment. It was a farce, a synonym for juggled duty, a word to suggest the one-man law of the place, for even Courtrey, who made the sheriffs—and unmade them—

did it under the grandiloquent name of Government. She looked at him keenly, and there was a sudden hardening in her young eyes.

"Then I reckon, Mister," she said coolly, "that you an' me can't be friends."

"What?"

"No, sir."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Certainly am," said Tharon. "I ain't on good terms at present with anything that has t' do with law."

David Kenset leaned forward and looked into her face with his deep, compelling eyes.

"I guessed as much from my first knowledge of you the other day," he answered, "but we are on unfamiliar ground. You have a wrong conception of Government, a perverted idea of law and what it stands for."

"All right, Mister," said the girl rising. "We won't argy. I asked you t' dinner, but I take it back. I ask ye t' forgive me my manners, but th' sooner we part th' better. Then we won't be a-hurtin' each other's feelin's. I'm fer law, too, but it ain't your kind, an' we ain't likely to agree."

She picked up his hat from where it lay on the melodeon and fingered it a bit, smiling at him in the ingenuous manner that was utterly disarming.

A slow dark flush spread over the man's face. He laughed, however, and in reaching for the hat, caught two of her fingers, whether purposely or not, Tharon could not tell.

"Admirable hospitality in the last frontier," he said. "But perhaps I should not have expected anything different."

"You make me ashamed," said Tharon straightly, "but Last's ain't takin' chances these days. You may belong to Government, an' you may belong to Courtrey, an' I'm against 'em both."

She walked with him to the door, stepped out, as if with some thought to soften her unprecedented treatment of the stranger under her roof. She noted the trim figure of him in its peculiar garb, the proud carriage, the even and easy comportment under insult.

From his saddle he untied a package wrapped in paper.

"Will you please take this?" he asked lightly, holding it out. "Just on general principles."

But she shook her head.

"I can't take no favours from you when I've just took stand against you, can I?" she asked in turn.

"Well, of all the ridiculous——"

The man laughed again shortly, tossed the

package on the step, mounted, whirled and rode away without a backward glance.

Tharon stood frowning where he left her until the brown horse and its rider were well down along the levels toward Black Coulee.

Then a sigh at her shoulder recalled her and she turned to see the wistful dark face of Paula gazing raptly in the same direction.

"He was so handsome, Señorita," said the girl, "to be so hardly dealt with."

"Paula," said the mistress bitingly, "will you remember who you're talkin' to? Do you want to go back to th' Pomos under th' Rockface?"

"Saints forbid!" cried Paula instantly.

"Then keep your sighs for José an' mind your manners. Pick up that bundle."

Swiftly and obediently the girl did as she was told, unrolling the wrapper from the package.

She brought to light the meal-sack which Tharon had dropped that day on Baston's porch.

A slow flush stained Tharon's cheeks at the sight, and she went abruptly into the house.

When the riders came in at night she told them in detail about the whole affair, for Last's and its men were one, their interests the same.

They held counsel around the long table in the dining room under the hanging lamp, and Conford at her right was spokesman for the rest.

"He's somethin' official, all right, I make no doubt, Tharon," he said when he had listened attentively, "but what or who I don't know. I heard from Dixon about him comin' into Corvan that day, an' that he had rode far. No one knows his business, or what he's in Lost Valley for. He's some mysterious."

"He's goin' to stay, so he told me," went on the girl, "goin' to build a house up where the pines begin an' means to ride. But how'll he live? What an' who will he ride for? He said for Government."

"What's he mean by that?"

"Search me."

"Wasn't there nothin' about him different? Nothin' you could judge him by?" asked Billy.

"Yes, there was. He wore somethin' on his breast, a sign, a dull-like thing with words an' letters on it."

"So?" said Conford quickly, "what was it like, Tharon? Can't you describe it?"

"Can with a pencil," said Tharon, rising. "Come on in."

She went swiftly to the big desk in the other room and rummaged among its drawers for paper and pencil. These things were precious in Lost Valley.

Jim Last had had great stacks of paper, neat, glazed sheets with faint lines upon them, made somewhere in that mysterious "below" and brought in by pack train. It was on one of these, with the distinctive words "Last's Holding" printed at the top, that the thirty men had signed themselves into the new law of the Valley.

To Tharon these sheets had always been magic, invested with grave dignity.

Anything done upon them was of import, irrevocable.

Thus had Jim Last inscribed the semi-yearly letters that went down the Wall with the cattle, or for supplies.

Now she spread a shining pad under the light, sat down in her father's chair and began, carefully and minutely to reproduce the badge that meant authority of a sort, yet was not a sheriff's star.

The riders, clustered at her shoulder, watched the thing take shape and form. At the end of twenty painstaking minutes Tharon straightened and looked up in the interested faces.

"There," she said, "an' its dull copper colour!"

And this was the shield with its unknown heraldry which Conford took up and studied carefully for a long time.

"'Forest Service,'" he read aloud, "'Department of Agriculture.'" Well, so far as I can see, it ain't so terrifyin'. That last means raisin' things, like beets an' turnips an' so on, an' as for th' forest part, why, if he stays up in his 'fringe o' pines' I guess we ain't got no call to kick. Don't you worry, Tharon, about this new bird.

"I'm a darned sight more worried about that other one, th' Arizona beauty which Courtrey's got in."

"Forget th' gun man, Burt," said Billy, "this feller's a heap more interestin' to me, for I've got a hunch he's a poet. Now who on this footstool but a poet would come ridin' into Lost Valley with his badge o' beets an' his line o' talk about 'fringes o' pines' an' 'runnin' streams,' to quote Tharon?"

"Even poets are human, you young limb," drawled Curly in his soft voice, "an' I'm sorry for him if he starts your 'interest,' so to speak. He'll need all his poetic vision t' survive."

"I hope, Billy," said Tharon severely, and with lofty inconsistency, "that you'll remember your

manners an' not start anything. Last's is in for trouble enough without any side issues."

"True," said the boy instantly, "I'll promise to leave th' poet alone."

Then the talk fell about the new well that had taken the place of the old Crystal and which was proving a huge success.

"Can't draw her dry," said Bent Smith, "pulled all of three hours with Nick Bob an' Blue Pine yesterday an' never even riled her.

"She's good as th' Gold Pool or th' Silver Hollow now."

"You're some range man t' make any such a comparison," said Curly with conviction, "there ain't no artificial water-well extent that can hold a candle t' th' real livin' springs of a cattle country, when they're such bubblin', shinin' beauties as th' Springs of Last's."

"You're right, Curly," said Tharon quietly from under the light, "there's nothin' like them. They must be th' blessin's of God, an' no mistake. They're th' stars at night, an' th' winds an' th' sunshine. They're th' lovers of th' horses, th' treasure of th' masters. I love my springs."

"So do th' herds," put in Jack Masters. "They'll come fast at night now because they can smell th' water far off, an' it's gettin' pretty dry on th' range."

"Yes," sighed Tharon, "it's summer now, an' Jim Last died in spring. A whole season gone."

A whole season had gone, indeed, since that tragic night.

Last's Holding had missed its master at each turn and point. A thousand times did Conford, the foreman, catch himself in the act of going to the big room to find him at his desk, a big, vital force, intent on the accounts of the ranch, a thousand times did he long for his keen insight. The *vaqueros* missed him and his open hand.

The very dogs at the steps missed him, and so did El Rey, waiting in his corral for the step that did not come, the strong hand on his bit.

And how much his daughter missed him only the stars and the pale Virgin knew.

For the next few days following the short, awkward visit of the stranger Tharon felt a prickle of uneasiness under her skin at every thought of it. There was something in the memory that confused and distressed her, a feeling of failure, of a lack in her that put her in a bad light to herself.

She knew that, instinctively, she had been protecting her own, that since Last's had stepped out in the light against Courtrey she must take no

chance. But should she have taken back the common courtesy of the offered meal? Would it not have been better to let him stay and meet Conford who would have been in at noon?

She vexed herself a while with these questions, and then dismissed them with her cool good sense.

"It's done," she told herself, "an' can't be helped. An' yet, there was somethin' about him, somethin' that made me think of Jim Last himself—somethin' in his quiet eyes—as if they had both come from somewhere outside Lost Valley where they grow different men. It was a—bigness, a softness. I don't know."

And with that last wistful thought she forgot all about the incident and the man, for the prediction of Jameson that dusk at the head of Rolling Cove became reality.

Dixon, who lived north along the Wall near the Pomo settlement, lost ten head of steers, all white and deeply earmarked, unmistakable cattle that could not be disguised.

Courtrey was resenting the vague something in the air that was crystallizing into resistance about him.

Word of the stealing ran about the Valley like a grass fire, more boldly than usual.

It came to Last's in eighteen hours, brought by

a horseman who had carried it to many a lonely homestead.

Tharon received it with a thrill of joy.

"Good enough," she said, "no use wasting time."

And she sent out a call for the thirty men.

CHAPTER V

THE WORKING OF THE LAW

IT was a clear, bright morning in early summer. All up and down Lost Valley the little winds wimpled the grass where the cattle grazed, and brought the scent of flowers. In the thin, clear atmosphere points and landmarks stood out with wonderful boldness.

The homesteads set in the endless green like tiny gems, the stupendous face of the Wall, stretching from north to south and sheer as a plumb line for a thousand feet, was fretted with a myriad of tiny seams and crevasses not ordinarily visible.

Far up at the Valley's head against the huge uplift of the jumbled and barren rocklands the scattered squat buildings of the Stronghold brooded like a monster.

Spread out on the velvet slopes below lay the herds that belonged to it, sleek fat cattle, guarded carelessly by a few lazy and desultory riders. Courtrey was too secure in his insolent might to take those rigid and untiring precautions which

SHE TALKED WITH CONFORD WHO RODE BESIDE HER AND NOW AND THEN SHE SMILED

were the only price of safety to the lesser men of the community. Toward the south where the Valley narrowed to the Bottle Neck and the Broken Bend went out, there shimmered and shone like a silver ribbon hung down the cliff the thin, long shower of Vestal's Veil fall.

The roar of it could be heard for miles like the constant and incessant wail of winds in time-worn cañons.

Along the floor of the Cup Rim range, sunken and hidden from the upper levels, there rode a compact group of horsemen. They went abreast, in column of fours, and they were armed to the teeth, a bristling presentation. All in all there were forty-two of them and at their head rode Tharon on El Rey, a slim and gallant young figure.

Her bright hair, tied with a scarlet ribbon, shone under her wide hat like an aureole. She talked with Conford who rode beside her, and now and then she smiled, for all the world as if she went to some young folks' gathering, instead of to the first uncertain issue of blind mob law against outlaws.

But if she felt a lightness of excitement in her heart it was more than actuated by the grim and quiet band that followed.

They knew—and she knew, also—that what

they did this day, in the open sunlight, meant savage strife and bloodshed for some as sure as death.

For two hours they rode across the sunken range where the cottonwoods and aspens made a lovely and mottled shade, to reach at last the sharp ascent to the uplands above. When they topped the rim and started forward, the huge herds of Courtrey lay spread before them, bright as paint on the living green. Two thousand cattle grazed there in peace and plenty. Here and there a rider sat his horse in idleness. At the first sight of the solidly formed mass coming out of the Cup Rim on to the levels, these riders straightened in their saddles and rode in closer to their charges.

The eyes of the newcomers went over the bright pattern of the grazing cattle. A motley bunch they were, red, black and white, with here and there descendants of the yellows which none but John Dement had ever owned in Lost Valley. Dement, riding near the head of the line saw this and muttered in his beard.

"Thar's some o' mine," he said pointing, "th' very ones that was stampeded. I'd know 'em in hell."

With the nearing of the line of horsemen a rider detached himself from the right of the herd

and went sailing away across the levels toward the distant Stronghold.

Quick as a flash Tharon Last lifted the rifle that lay ready on her pommel and sent a shot whining toward him.

"Just to show we mean business," she muttered to herself.

The cowboy caught the warning and drew his running horse up to slide ten feet on its haunches.

He had meant to warn his boss, but a chance was one thing, certainty another.

"Dixon—Dement," called Tharon rising in her stirrups, "when we get to work you pick out as near as you can, cattle that look like yours, an' th' same amount—not a head more."

Then they swung forward at a run and swept down along the left flank of the herd. Here a rider raised his arm and fired point blank at the leaders. One-two-three his six-gun counted. He was a lean youngster, scarce more than a boy, a wild admirer of Courtrey, and he stood his defence with a sturdy gallantry that was worthy of a better cause.

"Damn you!" he yelled, standing in his stirrups, "what's this?"

"Law!" pealed the high voice of Tharon as El Rey thundered down toward him. Then Buford, riding midway of the sweeping line, fired

and the boy dropped his gun, swayed and clung to his saddle horn as his horse bolted and tore off at a tangent to the right, away from the herd.

"God!" cried the girl hoarsely, "I wish we didn't have to! Did you kill him?"

"No," called Buford sharply, "broke his arm."

Tharon, to whom the high blue vault had seemed suddenly to swing in strange circles, shut her teeth with a click.

Abreast of the cattle she swerved El Rey aside, drew her guns and waited.

In among the grazing cattle, many of which had raised startled heads to eye the intruders, went the men. They worked swiftly and deftly. They knew that they were in plain sight of the Stronghold and expected every moment to see Courtrey and a dozen riders come boiling out. Those cowboys who had been in charge of the herd, sat where they were, without a move. Out of the bright mass the settlers cut first the ten head of steers, as nearly as possible all white, to take the place of Dixon's band. Thomas and Black stood guard over them. Then they went back and took out yellows and yellow-spotted to the number of one hundred. It was fast work, the fastest ever done on the Lost Valley ranges, and every nerve was strained like a singing wire.

Under the dust cloud raised by the plunging

hoofs, the whirling horses, the workers kept as close together as possible.

They rounded up the cut-outs, bunched them together compactly and swinging into a half circle, drove them rapidly back toward the oak-fringed edge of the Cup Rim. They passed close to where the slim boy stood by his horse, trying to wind the big red kerchief from his neck about his right arm from which the blood ran in a bright stream. Tharon swung out of her course and shot toward him.

"Here," she cried swiftly, "let me tie it."

"To hell with you," said the lad bitterly, raising blazing eyes to her face. "You've made me false t' Courtrey. I'd die first."

"Die, then!" she flung back, "an' tell your master that th' law is workin' in this Valley at last!"

As the last rider of the cavalcade went down over the slanting edge of the Cup Rim there came the sound of quick shots snapping in the distance and the belated sight of riders streaming down from the Stronghold hurried the descent.

They had reached the level floor of the sunken range and spread out upon it for better travelling before Courtrey and his men, some ten or fifteen riders, appeared on the upper crest.

The settlers stopped instantly at a call from

Conford, drew together behind the cattle, turned and faced them. They were too far away for speech, out of rifle range, but the still, grim defiance of that compact front halted the outlaw cattle king and his followers.

For the first time in all his years of rising power in Lost Valley Courtrey felt a challenge. For the first time he knew that a tide was banking in full force against him. A red rage flushed up under his dark skin, and he raised a silent fist and shook it at the blue heavens.

The grim watchers below knew that gesture, significant, majestic, boded ill to them.

But Tharon Last, muttering to herself in the hatred that possessed her of late at sight of Courtrey, raised her own doubled fist and shook it high toward him, an answer, an acceptance of that challenge.

Then they calmly turned and drove the recovered cattle down along the sloping levels at a fast trot.

The die was struck. Lost Valley was no longer a stamping-ground for wrong and oppression. It had gone to war.

That night the white and yellow herd bedded at the Holding, *vaqueros* rode about it all night long, quietly, softly under the stars. The settlers walked about, smoking, or sat silently in the dark-

ened living room. At midnight Tharon and young Paula made huge pots of coffee which they dispensed along with crullers.

By dawn the cattle were well on their way, still safeguarded by the band of men, down toward the homesteads where they belonged.

During that night of unlighted silence plans had been perfected in low voices, a name chosen for the band itself. They would call themselves the Vigilantes, as many another organization had called itself in the desperate straits that made its existence imperative.

By sundown the hundred head had been driven, hot and tired, into John Dement's corrals, the ten white steers were bedded by Black's Spring over toward the Wall. They had farther to go and would not reach Dixon's until the morning.

And with each band there was a group of determined men.

Word of this exploit ran all over the Valley in a matter of hours. To each faction it had a deep significance.

But speech concerning it was sparse as it had ever been anent the doings of Courtrey. A man's tongue was a prisoner to his common sense those days.

To Tharon Last, busy at her tasks about the

Holding, it was a vital matter. She felt a strong surge, an uplift within her. She had begun the task she had set herself and solemn joy pervaded her being.

But of all those whom it affected there was none to whom it meant what it did to Courtrey himself. In him it set loose something which burned in him like a consuming fire. Where he had thought of Tharon Last before with a certain intent, now he thought of her in a sort of madness. He was a king himself, in a manner, an eagle, a prowler of great spaces, a rule-or-ruin force. Down there on the sloping floor of the Cup Rim had been a fit mate for him in the slim girl who had shaken her fist back at him in strong defiance.

He felt his blood leap hot at the thought of her. She was built of fighting stuff. No pale willy-nilly, like some he knew who wept whole fountains daily. No—neither was she like Lola of the Golden Cloud, past-master of men because she had belonged to many.

Courtrey, who had run life's gamut himself, thought of Tharon Last's straight young purity with growing desire.

It began to obsess him with a mania. His temper, bad at all times, became worse. Ellen, the veriest slave through her devotion to him,

found her life at the Stronghold almost unbearable.

She was a white woman, like a lily, with transparent flesh where the blue veins showed. Her pale blue eyes, like the painted eyes of a china doll, were red with constant tears under their corn-silk lashes. The pale gold hair on her temples was often damp with the sweat that comes with agony of soul.

"It jes' seems I can't live another minute, Cleve," she would tell her brother who lived at the Stronghold, "seems like I don't want to. Th' very sunlight looks sad t' me, an' I hate th' tree-toads that are singin' eternal down in th' runnel."

This brother, her only relative, would stir uneasily at such times and the fire that shot from his eyes, light, too, under the same corn-silk lashes, was a rare thing. Nothing but this had ever set it burning. He was a slight man, narrow-chested and thin. They had been from run-down stock, these two, a strain that seemed indigenous to the Valley, without other memories. Their name was Whitmore, and they had lived all their lives in a poor cove up beyond the Valley's head where the barren rocklands came down out of the skies. There had been, besides themselves, only the father and mother, worn-out workers, who had

died at last, leaving the brother and sister to live as best they might in the solitudes.

Here Courtrey had found them, both in their teens, and he had promptly taken them both along with their scant affairs. It was about the only thing to his credit that he had married Ellen, hard and fast enough, with the offices of a bona fide justice, a matter which he had regretted often enough in the years that followed.

It was this knowledge which set the light burning in Cleve's eyes.

He knew how Ellen loved Courtrey.

He knew also that Lola of the Golden Cloud had made the cattle king step lively for over a year. He saw the daily growing impatience with which Courtrey regarded his marriage.

He resented with every ounce of the repressed spirit there was in him the girl's poor standing at the Stronghold.

Black Bart and Wylackie Bob treated her with no more consideration than any of the Indian serving women. They swore and drank before her with an abandon that made the young man's nails cut deep in his palms at times, the blood mount high in his white cheeks.

And Ellen drooped like a lily on a broken stem, brooded over her husband's absences, and hated

the name of Lola, used openly to her as a cruel joke.

The Stronghold was a huge place. The house was like the majority of the habitations of the region, built of adobe and able to stand siege against a regiment. It was shaded by cottonwoods and spruces, flanked by corrals and barns and sheds until the place resembled a small town.

Cleve Whitmore rode for Courtrey but his heart was not in Courtrey's game. He was slim and sullen, dissatisfied, slow of speech, repressed.

He worked early and late and thought a lot.

Courtrey, who kept close count of the favours he did for others, considered Cleve deep in his debt and paid him a niggardly wage. So it was, that when the newly organized Vigilantes under Tharon Last came out in broad day and took back their own from Courtrey's herds, there was one at the Stronghold who laughed quietly to himself in sympathy with the defy.

"Good enough," he told the wide sky and the silence as he rode herd under the beetling rocklands, "hope t' God some one gits him good an' plenty."

But Courtrey was hard to get. His aides and lieutenants were picked men. He was like a king in his domain.

But if strife and ferment seethed under the calm surface in Lost Valley, its surges died before they reached the rolling slopes where the forests came down to the eastern plains. Up among the pines and oaks, the ridges and the age-worn, tumbled rocks David Kenset had found his ideal spot, his glade where the pines stood guard and a talking stream ran down. High on the wooded slopes he had set his mark, begun that home of which he had told Tharon. From Corvan he had hired three men, a teamster by the name of Drake and his two sons, and together they had felled and dressed trees enough for a cabin, laid them up with clay brought five miles on mule-back, roofed the structure with shakes made on the spot with a froe, and the result was pleasing, indeed, to this man straight from the far eastern cities.

The cabin faced southwest, set at an angle to command the circled glade, the dropping slopes, the distant range lands, the wooded line of the Broken Bend, and farther off the levels and slants of the gently undulating Valley, with the mighty Rockface of the Wall rising like a mystery beyond. Kenset cut all trees at the west and south of the glade, thus forming a splendid doorway into his retreat, through which all this shone in, like those wonderful etched landscapes one some-

times sees in tiny toys that fit the narrowed eye.

Before the cabin was finished, Starret, who ran the regular pack-train, brought in a string of trunks and boxes which caused much curious comment in Corvan. These came up, after much delay, to be dumped in the door yard of the house in the glade, and Kenset felt as if the gateway to the outside world might close and he care very little.

Here was the wilderness, in all verity, here was work, that greatest of boons, here were health and plenty and the hazard of outlawry, that he was beginning to dimly sense under the calmly flowing currents of Lost Valley.

And here was Romance, as witness the slim girl who had backed out from a group of men that first day of his coming—backed out with her guns upon them, himself included, and mounted a silver stallion, whose like he had not known existed. In fact, Kenset had thought he knew horses, but he stood in open-mouthed wonder before the horses of Lost Valley—the magnificent Ironwood bays of Courtrey's, with their wonderful long manes and tails that shone like a lady's hair, the Finger Marks which he had seen once or twice, and marvelled at.

With the opening of the boxes the cabin in the glade took on a look of home, of individuality. A

big dark rug, woven of strong cord in green and brown, came out and went down on the rough floor, leather runners were flung on the two tables, a student lamp of nickel, a pair of old candlesticks in hammered brass, added their touch of gleam and shine to table and shelf-above-the-hearth, college pennants, in all the colours of the rainbow, were hung about the walls between four fine prints in sepia, gay cushions, much the worse for wear, landed in the handsome chairs, and lastly, but far from being least, three long shelves beneath the northern windows were filled to the last inch with books.

When all these things had been put in place Kenset stood back and surveyed the room with a smile in his dark eyes.

"Some spot," he said aloud, "some spot!"

On the small table that was to do duty as a desk in the corner between the southwest window and the fireplace he stacked neatly a mass of literature, all marked with the same peculiar shield of the pine trees and the big U. S. that shone always on his breast.

To the Drakes these things were of quick interest, but they asked no questions.

When the last thing had been done to the cabin they set to work and built a smaller cabin for the good brown horse which Kenset had bought far

down to the south and west in the Coast Country, for Sam Drake told him that Lost Valley locked its doors to all the world in winter. He would house his only friend as he housed himself.

When the Drakes, father and sons, were gone back down to Corvan for good, Kenset stretched himself, physically and mentally, and began his life in the last frontier.

He began to be out from dawn to dark riding the ridges, exploring the wooded slopes, the boldly upsweeping breasts of the nameless mountains, making friends with the rugged land. It was a beautiful country, hushed and silent, save for the soft song of the pines, the laughter of streams that ran to the Valley, cold as snow and clear as wind. Strange flowers nodded on tall stems in glade and opening, peeped from the flat earth by stone and moss-bed. Few birds were here, though squirrels were plentiful.

Sometimes he saw a horseman sitting on some slant watching him intently. These invariably rode rapidly away on being discovered, not troubling to return his salute of a hand waved high above him.

"Funny tribe," he told himself, half puzzled, half irritated, "their manners seem to be peculiarly their own. As witness the offered meal so

calmly 'taken back' by the young highwaywoman of Last's Holding."

That had rankled. Sane as Kenset was, as cool and self-contained, he could not repress a cold prickle of resentment at that memory.

He had gone to the Holding in such good faith, actuated by a lively desire to see Tharon again after that one amazing meeting at Baston's steps, and he had been so readily received at first, so coolly turned out at last. But he had not forgotten the look in the girl's blue eyes, nor the disarming smile which had seemed to make it reasonable.

She merely did not hold with law, and wanted him to have no false impressions. This incident furnished him with more food for thought than he was aware of in those first long days when he rode the silent forest.

What was Tharon Last, anyway? What did she mean by those words of hers about his law and hers? That they were not the same sort of law—that he and she would not agree?

They could not be friends, she had said.

Well, Kenset was not so sure of that. There was something about this girl of the guns that sent a thrill tingling in his blood already, made him recall each expression of her speaking face, each line of her lean young figure.

He did not go near Last's again, though his business took him far and by in the Valley, for the big maps, hung on a rack beyond his fireplace, covered full half the ranges thereof and stretched away into the mysterious and illimitable forests that went up and away into the eastern mountains.

It was as if some fateful Power at Washington had set down a careless finger on a map of the U. S. A., and said to Kenset, "Here is your country," without knowledge or interest. Sometimes he wondered if there was another forest in the land as utterly lost as this, as little known.

But with this wonder came a thrill. He had read romances of the great West in his youth and felt a vague regret that he had not lived in the rollicking days of '49. Now as he rode his new domain he smiled to himself and thought that out of a modern college he had been set back half a century. Here was the rule of might, if he was not mistaken. Here was romance in its most vital and appealing form. Yes, he felt himself lucky.

So he took up his life and his duties with a vim. He rode early and late, took notes and gathered data for his first reports, and set up for himself in Lost Valley a spreading antagonism.

If he rode herd on the range lands, the timber sections, there were those who rode herd on him. Not a movement of his that was not reported faith-

fully to Courtrey, not a coming or going that was not watched from start to finish.

And the cattle king narrowed his eyes and listened to his lieutenants with growing disapproval.

"Took up land, think?" he asked Wylackie Bob. "Homesteadin' ?"

Wylackie shook his head.

"Ain't goin' accordin' to entry," he said, "no more'n th' cabin. Don't see no signs of tillin'. He ain't fencin', nor goin' to fence, as near as I can find out."

"Cattle?"

"No. Nor horses."

"Hogs, then?"

"No."

"Damn it! maybe it's sheep!" and the red flush rose in the bully's dark cheeks.

"Don't think so. Seems like he's after somethin', but what it is I can't make out."

But it was not long before the Stronghold solved the mystery, for Kenset rode boldly in one day and introduced himself.

It was mid-afternoon, for the cabin in the glade lay a long way from the Valley's head, and the whole big place lay silent as death in the summer sun.

The Indian serving women were off in the depths somewhere, the few *vaqueros* left at home

were out about the spreading corrals, and all the men that counted at the ranch had ridden into Corvan early in the day.

Only Ellen, pale as a flower, her sweet mouth drooping, sat listlessly on the hard beaten earth at the eastern side of the squat house where the spruce trees grew, her hands folded in her lap, a sunbonnet covering the golden mass of her hair.

At the sound of his horse's hoofs on the stone-flagged yard Kenset saw her start, half rise, fling a startled look at him and then sink back, as if even the advent of a stranger was of slight import in the heavy current of her dull life.

He came in close, drew up, and, with his hat in his hand, sat smiling down at her. To Kenset it was more natural to smile than not to.

The girl, for she was scarce more, looked up at him and he saw at once, even under the disfiguring headgear, that here was a breaking heart laid open for all eyes. The very droop and tremble of the lips were proof.

"Mrs. Courtrey?" he asked gently.

At the words, the smile, the unusual courtesy of the removed hat, Ellen rose from her chair, a tall, slim wisp of a woman, whose blue-veined hands were almost transparent.

"Yes," she said, and waited.

That little waiting, calm, unruffled, made him

think sharply of Tharon Last who had waited also for his accounting for himself.

"I am Kenset," he said, "of over in the foothills. Is your husband at home?"

"No," said Ellen, "he's gone in t' Corvan."

There was a world of meaning in the inflection.

"Yes? Now that's too bad. It's taken me a long time to come and I particularly wished to see him. Do you mind if I wait?"

"Why, no," said Ellen a bit reluctantly, "no, sir, I guess not."

Kenset swung off the brown horse and dropped the rein.

"Tired, Captain?" he asked whimsically, rubbing the sweaty mane, while the animal drew a long whistling breath and in turn rubbed the sticky brow band on its forehead on Kenset's arm.

"Looks like he's thirsty," said Ellen presently. "There's a trough round yonder at th' back," and she waved a long hand.

Kenset led Captain around back where a living spring sang and gurgled into a section of tree, deeply hollowed and covered with moss.

When he came back to the shade the woman had brought from some near place a second chair, and he dropped gratefully into it, weary from his long ride.

He laid his hat on the earth beside him and

smoothed the sleek, dark hair back from his forehead.

Ellen sat still and watched him with a steady gaze.

She was finding him strange. She looked at his olive drab garments, at the trim leather leggings that encased his lower limbs, at his smooth hands, at his face, and lastly at the dark shield on his breast.

"Law?" she asked succinctly.

"Well," smiled Kenset, "after a fashion."

She moved uneasily in her chair, and the man had a sudden feeling of pity for her.

"Not as you mean, Mrs. Courtrey," he hastened. "I am in the United States Forest Service, if you know what that is."

"No," said Ellen, "I don't know."

"It is simply a service for the conservation of the timber of this country," he explained gently, but he saw that he was not making it clear.

"The saving of the trees," he went on, "the care of the forests."

"Oh," she said, relieved.

"We look after the ranges, protect the woods from fire, and so on."

"Look after th' ranges? How?"

"Regulate grazing, grant permits."

"Permits?"

"Yes." And seeing that at last he had caught her interest, Kenset talked quietly for an hour and told her more than he had vouchsafed any other in Lost Valley about his work.

Gradually, however, he fell to talking to amuse her, for he saw the emptiness behind the big blue eyes, the aching void which there was nothing to fill, neither love nor hope.

As the sun sank lower toward the west Ellen took off the atrocity of calico and starch, and he saw with wonder the amazing beauty of her ropes of hair.

When he ceased talking the silence became profound, for she had nothing to say and speech did not come easy to her anyway. He did not know that at the windows and behind the door-jambs of the deep old house were clustered almost a dozen dusky women and children, drawn from all over the place and listening in utter silence.

Unconsciously he had drifted back to his life in the outside world, encouraged by the absorbing interest of the pale eyes that never left his face. He told Ellen of boat races on the Hudson, of theatres on Broadway, of college pranks and frolics, ranged over half the continent in little story and snatch of description.

Neither one noticed how the shadows were

lengthening, nor that the sun had dropped in majesty behind the mighty Wall.

It took the sound of running horses, many of them coming up along the slopes, to bring Kenset back to the present with a snap, to make the woman reach swiftly for the bonnet and clap it on her head.

"Mrs. Courtrey," said Kenset hurriedly, "this has been the first real talk I have had with any of my neighbours, and I want to thank you for it."

"Oh," quavered the woman, "I don't know as I'd ought to a-let you stayed! Mebby I'd oughtn't. But—but seems like you bein' so different, an' I not seein' no one, come day in day out, w'y I—I—"

"Sure," he returned quickly, understanding. "You did just right. I wanted to stay."

Then he rose to his feet and there came the thunder of the horses, the noise of men stopping from a run, dismounting.

Ellen rose and he followed her around the corner of the house to the door yard.

As they waited Courtrey, clad in dark leather chaps, his guns swinging, came toward them. At sight of Kenset he stopped short and an oath rolled from his lips. The kerchief at his neck was turned knot-back and hung like a glob of crimson blood upon his breast.

Under his hat, set at an angle, his dark hair fluffed strangely.

He was a splendid figure of a man, broad shouldered, slim hipped.

Now he looked hard at the stranger and a slow grin lifted his upper lip.

"What's this?" he said, and there was a light suspicion of thickness in his voice, "my wife got com-ny?"

Kenset heard the woman catch her breath, and the feeling of pity that had taken him at first for her intensified.

"No, Mr. Courtrey," he said advancing, "but you have," and he held out his hand. "I'm Kenset, from the foothills."

Courtrey, not four feet from him, did not look at the hand. Instead the glittering eyes under the hat-brim looked steadily into his with an expression that only one man in a hundred could have interpreted.

That one man, however, stood by the watering trough, his hand on the neck of a drinking horse —Cleve Whitmore who watched Courtrey without blinking.

For a moment Kenset stood so, his hand extended, waiting. Then the colour rose in his face and he drew back the hand, raised it, scrutinized it smilingly, and put it quietly on his hip.

Still smiling he raised his eyes again to Courtrey's face.

"Courtrey," he said, this time without the Mr., "I've come to Lost Valley to *stay*. I had hoped to be friends with all my neighbours. It would have made my work easier. However, with or without, I stay."

And he picked up his hat, set it on his head, walked over to the brown horse, flung up the rein, mounted and rode out of the Stronghold in utter silence.

His face was flaming, the blood of outraged dignity and deep anger beat in his temples like a drum. As he rode farther away he heard the embarrassing silence broken by the hoarse shouts of laughter of half drunken men.

"Go to it," he said aloud, clinching his fists on his saddle horn, "this is part of my duty. The Big Chief was right when he said, 'If you help the Service to tame Lost Valley you've got your work cut out.' It's a man-size job. I mustn't doubt my ability."

CHAPTER VI

EL REY AND BOLT

THARON Last and all her followers held themselves in readiness for anything in the days that followed the taking of the herds from Courtrey's range.

They locked their doors at night, stood double guard at corral and stable. Mothers scattered throughout Lost Valley gathered in their little ones and watched the slopes and levels when their men were out.

But a strange quietness seemed to settle down upon them. That for which they waited did not materialize. Courtrey and his gun men rode into Corvan and up and down the Valley on mysterious missions which were as unsettling as open depredations, but nothing happened. In fact, Courtrey, burning with the new desire that was beginning to obsess him, was working out a new design.

He began to draw away from Lola. His tri-weekly visits to the Golden Cloud dropped off a bit. He took to drifting about from saloon to

saloon, to being less pronounced in his frequenting of one or two places.

His cold eyes, however, set in their narrow slits beneath the heavy brows, picked out every settler that he met and promised vague things for the future. He knew to a man who had ridden up from Last's that day, and he meant that not one should escape full payment—some time. Now he thought of the girl who had defied him and he waited with leaping pulse. The memory of that kiss, taken by violence at her western door, was with him night and day. She stood for right and the dignity of order. He meant, for a time, to play her hand.

Therefore the settlers waited, and held their breath while they did so.

And Courtrey took to riding much more alone, to watching the slopes and stretches with a hand at his hat-brim, shading his keen eyes. He looked far and wide in the golden summer land for the sight of a silver horse cutting down the wind with a slim girl in saddle.

But Tharon was busy at the Holding and El Rey stamped and whistled in his paddock. The mistress knew that she had set stern tides flowing in the Valley, that sooner or later they were due to sweep away the peace and quiet that pervaded the cottonwoods and the singing springs. She

knew that Courtrey waited, but she made the most of that waiting.

Conford and Billy and the rest of the riders made strong bolts for all the doors of the house, reinforced the fences that held the herds at night, put trick locks on all the gates.

But the time came when the close retreat became irksome to the girl, and she went from room to room in an uneasiness that was foreign to her calm and happy nature. She read over and over the two or three old books that had been at the Holding since she could remember, made new covers for the tables in the living room, kept the hands of the Virgin full of fresh offerings. But these things staled.

She began to long for the distances, the open spaces, the feel of the swooping stallion under her sailing down the wind. Courtrey or no Courtrey, she could not fight it down. So, on a golden day when all the boys were out with the herds and only the Indian *vaqueros* left in charge by Conford were at the stables, she flung the big saddle with its silver studs and its sombre stain on El Rey, mounted and went out and away like the wind itself. Not since the day of the raid on Courtrey's stolen herds had she been on El Rey's back and the first long leap and drop of the great horse beneath her set the lights to sparkling in

her eyes, the blood to burning in her golden cheeks. She lay low on his neck and let him run, and her heart leaped up with lightness as it ever did when she rode in these thundering bursts.

There was no other horse in Lost Valley like the great king! Neither Redbuck nor Golden nor Drumfire! Neither Sweetheart nor Westwind! No, nor any Ironwood Bay that came down from Courtrey's Stronghold, Bolt and Arrow not excepted.

Tharon laughed and stroked the king's neck, thewed like steel beneath her hands. She had no fear of Courtrey and his hired killers. Sooner or later the issue would come, of course. Then she would kill the man as she had promised Jim Last, without a thought.

Nay, she thought of Ellen, fragile white flower, of whom she had heard.

A softening came about her young mouth at thought of her, a shadow flickered in her blue eyes for a moment. Then it was gone and she laughed, a whooping gale of joy, there alone in the green stretches between the earth and sky, with the note of El Rey's speed steadily rising in her ears.

It beat in her very heart, that singing note. She loved the king as she loved nothing else on earth, save only the memory of her father.

She went south toward the Black Coulee and she thanked her stars that her riders were grazing the herds north toward the Cup Rim. Here there was none to say her nay, to urge her with loving solicitude to go back.

The miles sped backward and she scarce noted their travel. She drew the king down a bit, slowed him from the swooping run, set him into the wonderful rock-and-away of the singlefoot and retied the ribbon on her hair. She wore no hat this day and the tawny cloud of her hair fluffed back from her forehead, straining at its bands, its loose ends standing up like fairy stuff all over her head. So, with her two arms held high above her and the reins in her teeth, she rode down by the mouth of Black Coulee—and up from the depths of the rugged wash that split the plain for seven miles there came across her path a man on a great bay horse.

Courtrey on Bolt! She knew the beautiful animal even so far away. It did not need the challenging toss of El Rey's head, the piercing scream that rang from his open mouth across the silence, nor the sudden lunge and strain against the bit.

That was Bolt, the mighty, and no mistake. None but Arrow carried his splendid head so regally, *none* other bore so huge a cloud of mane on his arching neck, so long a tail that spread like

a fan between his knees and almost swept the ground.

So, Courtrey came out of the Coulee to meet her! He would, maybe, force the issue. But Tharon was not ready for that. What was plain killing? No, she wanted more than that. She wanted to see him scourged and beaten, humiliated and robbed as he had robbed Lost Valley.

So she turned El Rey, though it took the whole strength of her young arms, and headed him back the way they had come. With the first turn and straightening leap her heart thumped hard against her ribs.

There, between her and the Holding, far distant, there were two riders—and they rode bay horses, both!

She made no doubt that they were Wylackie Bob and Black Bart, on Arrow and Slingshot.

A sudden mist of fear came across her eyes. A tightening caught her throat. She looked around the illimitable spaces that stretched away on all sides. There was nothing in all the spreading plains but the three riders, sprung from nowhere, it seemed, and herself.

Courtrey came rapidly up toward her, swinging a bit to the west. The others, set somewhat apart to right and left, bore down upon her. It looked

very much as if they meant to ride her down to the Black Coulee.

Once in its sheltering deep wash she would be helpless, cut off from escape. The Black Coulee went back into the eastern hills, lost itself up in the rugged and torturous clefts and chasms that cut the unknown ramparts, dark with forest and mysterious.

No! Not the Black Coulee and Courtrey to take her prisoner!

She looked this way and that. Then she saw that toward her right she had some margin. There was space there to swing away from the man in front who came like the wind itself toward her. She caught the seeming of great speed and her heart leaped again.

She recalled the day she had asked Jack Masters if Bolt could run like El Rey.

"How do I know?" he had answered. "I know it was speed, an' that is all." True enough. It was Bolt, coming like his namesake, down along the sloping stretches.

But a great wave of exultation swept over her. She rose in her stirrups, shook an insulting hand above her, dropped on El Rey's neck, swerved him east and swept away toward the lifting skirts of the wooded hills. She heard a yell behind her, glanced back and saw that the three Ironwoods

IN FACT COURTREY, BURNING WITH THE NEW DESIRE THAT WAS BEGINNING TO OBSESS HIM, WAS WORKING OUT A NEW DESIGN

were sweeping behind her, closing in together. It was to be a race at last!

At last the whispered comparisons that had stirred under the speech of the Valley concerning the Ironwoods and the Finger Marks was to have justification. For the first and only time, in her knowledge, they were to run.

"All right!" cried Tharon aloud. "Come on, you bastards! It's the king you come against an' Jim Last's blood! You'll never put a hand on either."

She struck her heels into El Rey's flanks, leaned over her pommel, wished she was on the king's bare back, reached her hands far out along the reins and began to call in his ear.

"Yeeoo! Yeeoo! Yeeoo!" she cried, a high, exciting note that keened in the singing wind. And El Rey, ever keen to run for no reason, finding himself called upon, stretched out his great body, dropped low to earth and began to run. The wind cut by Tharon's face like a knife in the first few leaps.

It shut her eyes in a dozen. She rode and laughed with a half sob in her throat. The thunder of the king's iron-shod hoofs was in her ears like the roar of the spring freshets when the empty cañons poured their temporary torrents down the Rockface into the Valley.

She knew he was running as she had never ridden before. She had never called upon him before. It was like being adrift upon the wind. She heard the note of his speed rising in her ears. It was as it had ever been, save that it was a higher note, thinner, sharper. There was scarce a sense of touch beneath her, a lack of jar, of vibration, so evenly and smoothly did the shining hoofs take the grassy plain.

Tears were in her eyes. Laughter was on her lips. This was speed indeed! She had a sick longing that Jim Last might see his two loved ones go!

Then she gathered herself to turn her head across her leaning shoulder and look back.

As her eyes swept into focus behind, the laughter slipped off her lips as if wiped by an invisible hand.

There, the same distance away as when they started, rode Courtrey!

No farther away!

Bolt, shining in the sun, was keeping pace with El Rey!

Farther back—a little farther back—was Arrow, running magnificently, too.

A greater distance behind the two came Slingshot.

Tharon was frightened. Not for herself. Not

for the intent of the men who came after her. Not for gun-fire, nor for capture.

She was afraid for the king! Afraid that Bolt could hold that wonderful pace! Then a surging rage rose and sickened her.

She leaned down again and called once more into the stallion's ear and once more the note rose a notch. She felt that great pulsing seeming of reserve. Always when she called there was the answer. The plain swam beneath her like a blur. The thunder of the king's hoofs was a single note also.

Then Tharon raised her eyes and saw that she had left the open land behind. The mountains were rising swiftly before, she was sweeping up their skirts. Trees flew by. She heard the singing of waters. The forests seemed to come down out of the skies to meet her, dark, forbidding.

She felt a sense of disaster, of helplessness. Where was she going, she and El Rey, with her enemies behind and coming fast? What was to be the end of the race? And then, all suddenly, the woods seemed to fall away on either side, a gateway to open up before her. A lovely open glade spread into the heart of the forest and the great king thundered in between the guarding pines. Like a silver flame he shot up the sloping

floor, slowed, changed and came to stop before a cabin that sat securely at the glade's head.

With the crashing pound of El Rey's ploughing hoofs upon the very stones at the step, a man came quickly from the interior of the cabin and stepped out, his hand lifted.

Tharon Last, her hair beating on her shoulders, her face pale as ashes, her breast heaving, looked back toward the opening in the trees, and saw Courtrey swing in a wide arc and circle past to disappear toward the north.

After him swept his two lieutenants, to fade swiftly from sight behind the shielding forest.

A grim expression spread over the face of the man at the step as he, too, beheld the end of the vital play.

Then he looked up at the girl on the silver stallion and his dark eyes were alight.

"What's this?" he asked abruptly.

Then Tharon seemed to become conscious of him for the first time.

She looked down at him and the black pupils were spread across the azure of her eyes, making them strangely exciting in their straight glance.

"This," she said, panting, "is some of the law of Lost Valley. Courtrey's law. That is the man I'm goin' to kill some day."

Kenset felt the blood flow back upon his heart,

an icy flood. The words were simple, sincere, unconscious of dramatic effect. They were as final as death itself, and he dropped his eyes unconsciously to the two guns at her hips. He wondered why she had ridden without a shot this time.

He found his lips suddenly dry and moistened them before he spoke.

"Why?" he asked, and his voice sounded strange to him.

"Because," said Tharon simply, "because he kissed me—once—an' shot my daddy—in th' back, th' hound!"

"God!" said Kenset.

For a moment there was silence while a bird called sharply from a pine top and the voice of the little stream became subtly audible.

It seemed to the man that all his values of life had suddenly become shifted, changed. The commonplace had become the unreal, the unlikely the familiar.

Guns and threats and racing horses with a woman for prize became on the moment natural events in this hidden setting.

And what a woman she was! He looked up in her face again and saw there sweetness and strength, and grim purpose beyond his conception. He knew that her words were downright, and that they meant no more to her than duty to be done,

a conscience cleared of debt. He glanced at the hand lying so quietly on the pommel and thought of it as stained with blood. At the fancy he frowned and mentally shook himself.

Then, with an impulse wholly beyond his command, he reached up and laid his own hand over that one on the pommel.

"Miss Last," he said gravely, "I have no words to express what I feel this moment about Lost Valley and its people. Will you get down and let me show you my house, here in my glade?"

Tharon sat quietly for a moment and looked down at him. She did not remove her hand from under his, neither did she seem to be conscious of it.

"Why should I?" she asked presently, "you don't owe me anything. I sent you away from my house. I wouldn't have come here if I'd known where I was goin'. It was a chance."

"Granted. And yet I want you to come across my threshold, to sit in my big chair. Will you come?"

Never in her life had the girl heard so low a voice. It was soft and gentle, yet full of a vibrant quality that belied its softness. The man himself was unlike Lost Valley men. He wore the olive drab trousers of the semi-military uniform, the leather leggings, a tan leather belt and a soft

woolen shirt of the same drab color. It lay open at the throat, and the base of his strong neck was white as a woman's. The dark eyes upturned to hers were deep and winning. The dark beard showed through his sharply shaven cheeks where the red blood pulsed, like dusky shadows.

A strange man, surely.

Tharon wondered what made him so different from other men she had known. There was Billy who had come into Lost Valley from somewhere "below," and Conford, and Curly. Jack Masters had been born in the Valley. So had Bent Smith. These men were her men, like herself and Jim Last. This man was from "below," too, yet he was unlike.

While she studied him he met her glance with the same grave look.

Presently, without a word, she swung herself from the saddle, dropped El Rey's rein, and stepped around his shoulder.

"All right," she said briefly, "but I won't stay any longer than I let you stay."

For the first time Kenset laughed.

"Twenty minutes, then," he said, "I don't think you let me exceed that limit."

He led the way to the door, stepped back and let her enter. As she did so she passed close to

him and caught the scent of him, the clean soft smell of shaving soap, blended with the aroma of good tobacco.

That, too, was different.

Inside the cabin there was a sense of comfort, of brightness. The long pennants, like captured rainbows, tacked to the rough walls, the soft toned prints, the gay cushions, all these lent an air of permanence, of home, that she had never before seen in a man's cabin. She stood and looked all around with that same half-insolent stare which had greeted Kenset at the Holding that memorable day.

Then she went slowly forward and sat down in the big chair by the table.

The man stood in her presence for a moment, thereby giving a subtle effect of deference which was not wholly lost upon Tharon, though she would have been at a loss to define it.

Then, he, too, sat down on the edge of the table desk in the corner, and with folded arms waited while she finished her scrutiny of the interior.

"I am proud of my home, Miss Last," he said presently. "What do you think of it?"

"I think," said Tharon slowly, "that it looks like there's a woman somewhere."

This time Kenset laughed in earnest, a ringing

peal that startled El Rey at the doorstep, and made him clink his bit-chains.

"There is," said the man, "assuredly."

Tharon turned her head and looked quickly over her shoulder.

"Where?" she asked in surprise.

"There in my big chair."

"Oh—I meant a woman livin' here, th' woman who owns the pretties."

And she waved a hand at the gay furnishings.

"No," said Kenset, "these are all my own pretties. I have books, as you see, and my maps and several more pictures to put up, not to mention some Mexican pottery that I brought from Ciudad Juarez, and my chiefest treasure, a tapestry from France. That last I can't decide upon. I have two splendid spaces—over there between the northern windows, facing the door, and yonder at the end. Perhaps you will be good enough to help me choose."

There was a boyish eagerness in his voice.

"Will you? After a while, I mean, when you have rested from your ride."

"Rested?"

Tharon looked at him in wonder. That ride had been like wine to her, a stimulant, a thing that sent the blood pounding in her veins.

Over the excitement had fallen a subtle shade,

however, a hush, with the sight of Bolt so close behind El Rey. If it had not been for that grave thing she would have felt like a wound-up spring, intent with energy, filled with action. She was always so when El Rey ran beneath her. And this stranger spoke of rest! Tharon Last could ride all day without a thought of rest.

"Sure," she said, "I'll help you if I can. But what's this thing?"

"A sort of picture," replied Kenset quickly, "a picture woven in cloth. But first, if you'll be so kind, I want you to break bread with me. You said we would not be friends. I'm not so sure of that. There is nothing like a man's bread and salt for the refutation of logic."

He slipped off the desk with a lithe rippling of his body, but Tharon was first on her feet.

"You mean stay to supper?" she asked decisively. "No, I can't do that. I took back a meal from you. That stan's between."

"Why, you funny girl," said Kenset, "nothing stands between. And I don't mean supper, exactly, either. Please sit down."

Tharon stood, considering. She turned the matter over in her mind.

She had taken this man's house by storm. It had, indeed, given her refuge. If it had not been for the glade in the pines, she wondered where

she would be now—driven deep into Black Coulee, she made no doubt, a prisoner to Courtrey.

"All right," she said abruptly, "I'll stay. But you must be quick. Th' time is goin' fast."

Kenset went swiftly across the cabin to that part which served as kitchen, and took from a curtain-covered set of shelves, a shiny nickel object on spindly legs, which he brought and placed near Tharon on the table.

He struck a match and presently a clean blue flame grew up beneath it.

He lifted the lid and filled the small pot, thereby exposed, with water from the bucket on a bench. Then he delved in one of the big trunks against the farther wall and brought out a little tin of cakes, such as one could buy in any city of the world.

All this was absorbing to the girl in the big chair, who watched with grave eyes. And Kenset kept up a running stream of gay talk all the time. He wanted to make her at ease, to cover the thought of the strain between them, and how much he wanted to drive from his own mind the knowledge that this sweet and wholesome creature was a potential murderer, he did not know. From a can he measured chocolate. From a pan somewhere outdoors he brought milk. Sugar he added carefully as a woman, and presently he spread between

them on the table a small repast that was strange to this girl of the wilderness.

He watched her with appraising eyes and saw that there was in her no consciousness of the unusual. She might have sat at meat in the big room of the Holding for all the flutter there was in her.

He told her somewhat of himself, of his life in the East, but he was careful not to ask about Lost Valley, to make mention of the circumstances that had brought her to his door. And so an hour passed as if it had been a bagatelle. The afternoon was waning when Tharon rose swiftly and abruptly terminated this first visit inside his home of any Lost Valley denizen.

"Bring out your picture," she said decisively, "I'll help you hang it, an' then I must go home."

So Kenset dived once more into the mysterious recesses of the trunk and this time brought out a thing of rare beauty and value, a large tapestry, some four by six feet in size, a wonderful thing of soft and deathless hues, of cunning distances, of Greek figures and leaning trees, of sea-line so faint as to be almost lost in the misty skies.

"Oh!" said Tharon Last with an intake of her breath, "Oh, where do they make such things?"

"Far on the other side of the world," said

Kenset gently, pleased with the wonder in her wide eyes, the evident and quick realization of beauty.

She whirled from it and glanced quickly at the two spaces on the rugged walls.

"There," she said, pointing to the broad expanse between the northern windows, "hang it there."

"Done," said Kenset, and went promptly for a hammer.

When the huge thick mat was securely stretched in place, Tharon helping to hold it while he pounded in the broad-topped tacks, Kenset stepped back and wondered how he had ever for a moment considered hanging it in any other spot. The tempered light from the door came in upon it, bringing out each enchanted charm, each tender vista.

"Wonderful!" he said to himself, "I never knew how lovely it was amid conventional surroundings!"

"Huh?" asked Tharon.

The man laughed in spite of himself and turned his eyes to hers, to lose his quick amusement in the earnest blue depths that seemed to question him at every angle.

"I mean that it looks better here in my cabin than it ever did on city walls."

"Why?"

"Well—I don't know. Contrast, perhaps."

Tharon stood a moment thinking.

"Perhaps," she answered slowly, "yes, perhaps. I guess that's why you seem so diff'rent to me. Jim Last used to say that was why th' Valley was so soft-like an' lovely, contrasted by th' Rockface."

"Do I seem different to you?" asked Kenset quickly. "How?"

"Yes. I don't know how. You seem soft, like a woman—some women—an' I'm afraid———"

She stopped suddenly, abruptly halted in her naïve speech, as if she had come face to face with something she had not meant to meet.

"Afraid?" probed the man gravely, "go on. You are afraid—of what?"

"No," said Tharon, "I won't say it."

"Please do. I want to know."

"Then," answered the girl straightly, after the honest and downright fashion of all her dealings, "I'm afraid you are—are too soft. You don't pack a gun. I'm afraid you wouldn't use it if you did."

There was a certain finality about the short speech, as if she had put the last word of condemnation to his estate.

Kenset looked down at his hands, spread them out a bit.

"You're right," he said shortly, though his voice was still gentle. "I don't. And I wouldn't. Not until the last extremity."

"An' what would that be?" she asked.

"I don't just know, Miss Last," he answered smiling and raising his eyes once more to hers, "it would have to be—the *last* extremity, I know.

"The hands of all my forbears have been clean, so far as I know. I have a deep horror of that imaginary stain which human blood seems to leave on the hands of the killer. Blood guilt."

"You call it that? My daddy had his killin's, but they were all in fair-an'-open. *I* called him a *man.*"

There was a ringing quality in her voice, a depth and resonance that spoke of war and heroes. The fire that all the Holding knew was suddenly in her eyes, flashing and flaming. Kenset caught it, and a thrill shot through him.

"Granted," he said quickly. "But is there only *one* type of man?"

"For me," said Tharon, "yes."

"I'm sorry," said he, and for the life of him he did not know why.

"So'm I," said Tharon honestly.

They looked at each other for a pregnant moment, while a silence fell on the cabin and they

could hear the singing water running down the slopes.

Then the girl stooped and rearranged the cushion in the big chair, laid a book more neatly on top of another at the table's edge.

"Th' time is up," she said, "I must be goin'."

She straightened her shoulders and looked at him again.

"I thank you for th' meal," she said, "an' some day I'll return it—in some manner. I don't know yet just what you're here for, nor if you're Courtrey's man or not————"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Kenset, but she went on.

"I won't shake hands with you, for whilst I ain't done no killin' yet, I'm sworn—an' Jim Last's hands was red—they would be to such as you—an' down to th' last drop o' blood, th' last beat o' my heart, I'm Jim Last's girl—th' best gun man in Lost Valley, if I do say so."

And she swung quickly to the door.

Kenset followed her. He longed for words, but found none.

There was a sudden tragic seeming in the very air, a change from the pleasant commonplace to the tense and unexpected. It was always so in these strange meetings with the people of Lost Valley, it seemed, as if he was never to find his

way among them, the sane and quiet course that he must travel.

As they reached the step at the door sill El Rey stamped and whinnied a shrill blast. In through the gateway between the pines there came a rider on a running horse, Billy on Golden who ploughed to a stop before them, his grey eyes troubled.

"Hello, Billy," said Tharon. "How's this?"

"Been lookin' for you," said the boy. "We saw Courtrey an' his ruffians ridin' up east—watched 'em with th' glass, an' Anita said you rode south. Thought you might have met 'em."

"I didn't meet 'em, so to speak," she said, smiling, "though if I'd been on anythin' but El Rey I would. They tried to drive me into Black Coulee.

"Hell!" said Billy softly.

Then the Mistress of Last's remembered her manners.

"Billy," she said, "I make you acquainted with Kenset of th' foothills. I rode in here just in time to shake th' Stronghold bunch."

The two men spoke, reached to shake each other's hands, and took a long survey that was mutual. As the two pairs of eyes met, a wall seemed to rear itself between them, a mist, a curtain, something intangible, but there.

They looked across the woman's shoulder, and from that moment she was to stand between, though what there could be in common between the man in the U. S. service and the common rider from Last's was not apparent. El Rey was eager for flight and by the time Tharon's foot was in the stirrup he was up on his hind feet, fore feet beating the air, silver mane like a flying cloud. The girl rose with him gracefully, threw her leg across the saddle, waved a hand to Kenset in the door, and in another moment they were gone away down the grassy slope, out through the opening, had stretched away along the oak-dotted plain, swung toward the north, and were out of sight.

The forest man turned away from the doorway, stood a moment looking over the cabin where the late light was making golden patterns on the green and brown rug, sighed and reached for his pipe.

Somehow all the spirit seem to have gone from the summer day. The long twilight was setting in.

"She wouldn't shake hands," he muttered to himself, "and what she said was true as death. She's *sworn*—and it is a solemn oath to her. God help the man who killed her daddy!"

Then once more he sighed, unconsciously.

"And Lord God help her!" he finished very gravely, "she is so sweet—so wild and spirited and sweet."

Tharon and Billy let the horses run. Golden was a racer himself, though he could not hold a candle to the silver king, and the two young creatures atop were free as the summer winds, as buoyant and filled with joy of being. So they shot down along the levels, Tharon holding El Rey up a bit, though it was a man-size job to do so, and Billy's rein swinging loose on Golden's neck. They passed the last of the scattered oaks, came out to the green stretches. The sun was swinging like a copper ball above the Wall at the west. Down through the cañons the light came in long red shafts that cut through the cobalt shadows like sharp lances of fire and reached half across Lost Valley. All the western part of the Valley lay in that blue-black shadow. They could see Corvan set like a dull gem in the wide green country, the scattered ranches, miles apart.

They swung down to the west a bit, for Tharon said she wanted to go by the Gold Pool and see how it was holding out.

"Fine," said Billy, "she's deep as she ever was at this time of year, an' cold as snow."

Where one tall cottonwood stood like a senti-

nel in the widespread landscape they drew rein and dismounted. Here a huge boulder cropped from the plain and under its protecting bulk there lay as lovely a spring as one would care to see, deep and golden as its name implied, above its swirling sands, for the waters were in constant turmoil as they pressed up from below.

The girl lay flat at its edge and with her face to the crystal surface, drank long and deeply.

As she looked up with a smile, Billy Brent felt the heart in him contract with a sudden ache.

Her fresh face, its cheeks whipped pink under their tan by the winds, its blue eyes sparkling, its wet red lips parted over the white teeth, hurt him with a downright pain.

"Oh, Tharon," he said with an accent that was all-revealing, "Oh, Tharon, dear!"

The girl scrambled to her feet anl looked at him in surprise.

"Billy," she said sharply, "what's th' matter with you? Are you sick?"

"Yes," said the boy with conviction, "I am. Let's go home."

"Sick, how?" she pressed, with the born tyranny of the loving woman, "have you got that pain in your stomach again?"

Billy laughed in spite of himself, and the romantic ache was shattered.

"For the love of Pete!" he complained, "don't you ever forget that? You know I've never et an ounce of Anita's puddin's since. No, I think," he finished judiciously as he mounted Golden, "that I've caught somethin', Tharon—caught somethin' from that feller of th' red-beet badge. Leastways I've felt it ever sence I left th' clearin'."

And as they swung away from the spring toward the Holding, far ahead under its cottonwoods, he let out the young horse for another stretch.

"Bet Golden can beat El Rey up home," he said over his shoulder.

"Beat th' king?" cried Tharon aghast, "you're foolin', Billy, an' I don't want to run nohow. I've run enough this day."

So the rider held up again and together they paced slowly up through the gathering twilight where long blue shadows were reaching out to touch them from the western Wall and the golden shafts were turning to crimson, were lifting as the sun sank, were travelling up and up along the eastern mountains toward the pale skies. Soon they rode in purple dusk while the whole upper world was bathed in crimson and lavender light and Lost Valley lay deep in the earth's heart, a sinister spot, secret and dark.

"Sometimes, Billy," said Tharon softly, "I

like to ride like this, in th' big shadows—an' then I like to have some one with me that I know, some one like you, some one who will understand when I don't talk, an' who is always there beside me. It's a wonderful feelin'—but somehow, it's soft, too—mebby too soft—like—like—like a woman who's just a woman."

The boy swallowed once, miserably.

"Always, Tharon," he said huskily, "always —when you want me—or need me—I'll be there, beside you. An' you don't need to even speak a word to me. I'm like th' dogs—there whether you call or not."

"I know," said the girl, and reaching over she caught the rider's hand, brown beneath its vanity of studded leather cuff, and gave it a little tender pressure.

Billy set his teeth to keep from crushing her fingers, and together they rode slowly up along the sounding slopes to the beautiful security and comfort of Last's Holding.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHOT IN THE CAÑONS

KENSET of the foothills was very busy. Between study of his maps and the endless riding of their claimed areas he was out from dawn till dark.

He found, indeed, that none but he, of late years, had ridden those sloping forest covered skirts. Some one, sometime, must have done so, else the maps themselves would not have been, but what marks they must have left were either gone through the erosion of the elements or been wantonly destroyed.

He fancied the former had been the case, for he saw no signs of destruction, and the very curiosity of the denizens of the Valley precluded familiarity with forest work.

So he laid out for himself the labour of a dozen men and went at it with a vim that kept him at high tension. Therefore he had little time to think of Tharon Last and the strange life

in Lost Valley. Only when he rode between given points, unintent on the land around, did he give up to his speculations. At such times his mind invariably went back to that first day at Baston's steps and he saw her again as he had seen her then, tense, stooping, her elbows bent above the guns at her hips, coming backward along the porch, feeling for the steps with her foot.

Always he saw the ashen whiteness of her cheeks beneath her blowing hair.

Always he frowned at the memory and always he felt a thrill go down his nerves. What was she, anyway, this wild, sweet creature of the wilderness who held herself aloof from his friendship, and said that she was "sworn?"

Kenset, sane, quiet, peace loving, shook himself mentally and tried not to think of her. But day after day he came down along the edges of the scattered woods where the cattle grazed—on the forest lands—and looked over to where the Holding lay like a greener spot on the green stretches.

He thought of her, living in this feudal hold, mistress of her riders, her cattle, and her wonderful racing horses of the Finger Marks, sweet, fair, wholesome—with the six-guns at her slender hips!

If only he, Kenset, could take those weapons from her clinging hands, could wipe out of her young heart the calm intent to kill!

It was preposterous! It was awful!

Bred to another life, another law, another type of woman, he could not reconcile this girl of Lost Valley with anything he knew.

He went over in his mind again and again the serene calmness of her in his cabin that day of the race with Courtrey, and shook his head in puzzlement.

But why should he trouble himself about her at all?

He had come here in his Government's service to reclaim its forest, to look after its interest.

Why should he bother with the moral code of Lost Valley?

But reason as he might, the face of Tharon Last came back to haunt him, waking or asleep.

He knew that it troubled him and was, in a way, ashamed. So he worked hard at his tasks, relocated boundaries, marked them with a peculiar blaze in convenient trees which looked something like this:

and set up monuments with odd and undecipherable hieroglyphics upon them.

And with each blaze, each mark and monument and sign, he drew closer in about him the net of suspicion and disapproval which was weaving in Lost Valley, for there was not one but ran the gamut of close inspection and speculation by Courtrey's men, by the settlers who came many miles over from the western side of the Valley for the purpose, and by Tharon's riders.

Low mutters of disapproval growled in the Valley.

Who was this upstart, anyway, to come setting signs and marks in the land that had been theirs from time immemorial? What mattered the little copper-coloured badge on his breast? What mattered it that he was beginning to send out word of his desire to work with and for the cattlemen of Lost Valley, the settlers, the homesteaders?

What was this matter of "grazing permits" of which he had spoken at the Stronghold?

Permits?

They had grazed their cattle where and when they chose—and could—from their earliest memory.

They asked no leave from Government.

When Kenset rode into Corvan he was treated with exaggerated politeness by those with whom

he had to deal, with utter unconsciousness by all the rest. To cattleman and settler alike he was as if he had not been.

None spoke to him in the few broad streets, none asked him to a bar to drink.

Serene, quiet, soft spoken, he came and went about his business, and sneers followed him covertly.

It was not long after Tharon's visit to the cabin in the glade, that Kenset, riding alone along the twilight land, passed close to the mouth of Black Coulee one day at dusk. He rode loosely, slouching sidewise in his saddle, for he had been to Corvan for his monthly mail and a few supplies tied in a bag behind his saddle, and he carried his broad hat in his hand.

The little cool wind that blew in from the narrow gorge of the Bottle Neck and spread out like an invisible fan, breathed on his face with a grateful touch. The day had been hot, for the summer was opening beautifully, and he had ridden Captain far. Therefore he jogged and rested, his arms hanging listlessly at his sides, his thoughts two thousand miles away.

At the mouth of Black Coulee where the sinister split of the deep wash came up to the level, there grew a fringe of wild poplar trees. They were beautiful things, tall and straight and thickly cov-

ered with a million shiny leaves that whirled and rustled softly in the wind, showing all their soft white silver sides when the breeze came up from the south as it did this day. There was water in Black Coulee, many small springs, not deep enough nor steady enough to count for water in a range country, but sufficient to keep the poplars growing on the rim of the great wash, to stand them thick on the caving sides. Whole benches of earth with their trees upon them slipped down these sides from time to time, making of the Coulee a mysterious labyrinth of thickets and shelves, of winding ways and secret places.

Kenset had heard a few wild stories about Black Coulee. Sam Drake had talked a bit more than most men of Lost Valley would have talked, and he had listened idly.

Now as he rode up along the levels and neared the dark mouth of the cut he studied it with appraising eyes. It was sinister enough, in all truth, a deep, dark place behind its veil of poplars, secretive, hushed.

The red light that dyed Lost Valley so wondrously at the hour of the sun's sharp decline above the peaks and ridges of the Cañon Country was awash in all the great sunken cup, save at the west under the Rockface where the shadows were already dark.

Kenset drank in the beauty of the scene with smiling eyes. Already a love for this hidden paradise had grown wonderfully in his heart. He felt as if he had never lived before, as if he had never known beauty.

And so, dreaming a little of other scenes, smiling to himself, he jogged along on Captain and was nearly past the frowning mouth of the Coulee, when there came the sharp snap of a rifle in the stillness, and Captain changed his feet, sagged and quivered, then caught himself and leaped ahead. For one amazed moment Kenset thought the horse was hit. Then, as he straightened in his saddle and dropped his hand to catch up his hanging rein, he looked quickly down. Where he was accustomed to the smooth feel of the pommel beneath his palm there was a sharp raw edge. A splinter of wood stood up and a small flare of leather hung to one side.

A bullet, singing out of Black Coulee, had carried away part of the pommel.

Kenset shut his lips in a new line, gathered up his rein and drew the horse down to a walk with an iron hand.

Slowly, without a backward glance, he rode on across the darkening levels. He was no fool.

He knew he had had his warning.

Very well. He would give back his acceptance of that warning.

He had said to Courtrey that night at the Stronghold that he had come to stay.

No bunch of lawless bullies were going to scare him out.

No other shot followed. He had not expected one.

For a time after that he went about his work as usual. Nothing happened; he had no outward sign of the distaste with which he was regarded by all factions alike, it seemed.

He met Courtrey face to face in Corvan one day and spoke to him civilly, but Courtrey did not speak. Wylackie Bob did, however—a sneering salutation that was a covert insult. Kenset touched his hat with dignity and passed on.

"Of all th' tenderfeet!" said Baston, watching the small by-play. "I b'lieve you could spit on him, boys."

"I don't," spoke up Old Pete, shuffling by on his bandy legs, "sometimes that quiet, soft-spoken kind rises—an' then hell's to pay in their veecinity."

But Wylackie looked at the weazened snow-packer with his snake-like eyes and snapped out a warning.

"Some folks takes sides too quick, sometimes."

But Old Pete went on about his business. He knew, as did all the Valley, that a price was on his head with Courtrey's band for the daring leap which had saved the life of Tharon Last that day in spring.

Sooner or later that price would be paid, but Old Pete was true western stuff. He had lived his life, had had his day, and he was full of pride at the turn of fate which had made him a hero in a way at the end.

All the Valley stood off and admired Jim Last's daughter.

Pete basked in the reflected light. And Tharon herself had taken his gnarled old hand one day in Baston's store and called him a thoroughbred.

Folks in Lost Valley were chary of words, conservative to the last degree. That simple word, the handclasp, the look in the clear blue eyes, had been his eulogy.

It was whispered about, as was every smallest happening, and came to the ears of Courtrey himself, who had promised those vague things for the future on the fateful night. But Courtrey was playing a waiting game. He was obsessed with the image of Tharon. Sooner or later he meant to have her, to install her at the Valley's head. He had always had what he wanted. Therefore,

he expected to have this girl with the challenging eyes, the maddening mouth, like crimson sumac.

Ellen?

Already he was setting in motion a thing that was to take care of Ellen.

The thing in hand now was to placate Tharon, the mistress of Last's, to play the overwhelming lover.

Courtrey knew better than to go near the Holding. Bully that he was he yet had sense enough to know that no fear of him dwelt in the huge old house under the cottonwoods. If Tharon herself did not shoot him, one—or all—of her riders would. The day of the armed band riding down to take her was, if not past, passing fast. He recalled the look of the settlers—poor spawn that he hated—whirling their solid column behind her to face him that day from the Cup Rim's floor.

No. Courtrey meant to have the girl some day—to hold in his arms that ached for her loveliness, the strong, resistant young body of her—to sate his thief's mouth with kisses. But he would call her to him of her own will, would taste the savage triumph of seeing her come suing for his mercy.

If Tharon meant to break Courtrey, he meant no less to break her.

Outlawry—mob law—they were pitted against each other.

And, lifting its head dimly through the smother of hatred, of wrong, of repression and reprisal, another law was struggling toward the light in Lost Valley—the sane, quiet law of right and equality, typified by the smiling, dark-eyed man of the cabin in the forest glade.

Courtrey sent word to Tharon—an illy spelled letter, mailed at Baston's—that he had meant nothing by that race above the Black Coulee, except another kiss. There was Courtrey's daring in the affronting words.

She sent the letter back to him—riding in on El Rey alone—with the outline of a gun traced across it.

"Th' little wildcat!" grinned the man, "she's sure spunky!"

Once again Tharon met Kenset in the days that followed. Riding by the Silver Hollow she stopped one breathless afternoon, drank of the snow-cold waters, shared them with El Rey, dropped the rein over the stallion's head and flung herself full length on the earth beside the spring. A clump of willow trees grew here, for every spring in Lost Valley had its lone sentinels to call its presence across the stretching miles. As the

girl lay flat on her back with her hands beneath her head, she looked up into the blue heart of the arching skies where the fleecy white clouds sailed, and a sense of sweetness and peace came down upon her like a garment.

"You're sure some lovely spot, Lost Valley," she said aloud, "an' no mistake. I know, more'n ever as th' days go by that Jim Last was only jokin' when he told me of those other places out below, big as you, lovely as you. It just ain't possible. Is it, El Rey, old boy?"

And she moved a booted foot to the king's striped hoof and tapped it smartly.

El Rey, always aloof, always touchy, never sure of temper, jumped and snorted. The girl laughed and crossed her feet and fell to speculating idly about the world that lay beyond Lost Valley. Little she knew of it. Only the brief words of her father from time to time, the reluctant speech of Last's riders, for the master of the Holding had laid down the law concerning this.

His daughter was of the Valley, content. He meant her to be so always. The man who had instilled into her young mind a discontent with her environment, a longing for the "flesh-pots" of the world as he had styled it once, would have had short shrift at Last's. He

would have received his time and "gone packing" swiftly.

And Tharon was content.

Barring the loneliness that had come with Jim Last's death, she was *well* content.

So she lay by the willows and hummed a sliding tune, a soft, sweet thing of minors and high notes falling, like rippling waters, and lazily watched the high white clouds sail by.

And as she lay she became conscious of something else in the drowsing land beside herself and her horse. She felt it first, this presence—a thin, dim vibration that sang in the earth beneath her. It stopped the wordless song on her lips, stilled the breath in her throat, set every nerve in her to listening, as it were.

Presently she sat up and felt quickly for the gun-butts in their scabbards. Then she parted the willows and looked out over the rolling slopes and levels. True enough. A horseman was coming in from the west, making for the Silver Hollow, but Tharon smiled and her fingers relaxed on the gun. This man rode straight—like a lance, she thought—and his mount was brown, a good-enough common horse, but no steed of Lost Valley.

Captain lacked the fire, the ramping keenness of the Ironwoods, the spirit and dash of the Finger Marks. For a long time the girl in the

willows watched them. Then as they came near she rose and caught El Rey's bridle.

He was no gentleman, this big blue-silver king. He was savage and wild and imperious. He hated other horses with a quick hatred sometimes and had been known to wreak this sudden rage upon them in sickening fury.

So Tharon held him with a strong brown hand wrapped in the chain below the Spanish spade bit in his mouth. She stood beside him, waiting, a slim, golden creature, tawny of hair and blue of eye, and the great horse towered above her mightily, his silver mane blowing up above his arching neck in the little wind that came from the south.

They made a picture that Kenset never forgot, as he swung round the willows and faced them.

El Rey screamed and pounded with his striped hoofs, but Tharon jerked him down with no gentle hand.

"Be still, you bully!" she said sharply.

"Why, Miss Last!" cried the forest man, "I'm so glad to meet you!"

There was the genuine delight of a boy in his voice, and Tharon caught the note. The sweet, disarming smile parted her lips and she was all girl at the moment, artless, innocent, unstained by the shadow of lawlessness and crime that

seemed to ever hang above her in Kenset's thoughts.

"Are you?"

"I certainly am."

He swung down, gave Captain a drink at the edge of the spring farthest from El Rey, dropped the rein when he had finished, and swung around to face the girl. He took off his wide hat and wiped his forehead with a square of linen finer than anything of its kind she had ever seen.

Then he stood for a moment looking straight into her eyes with his smiling dark ones. It seemed to Tharon that this man was always smiling.

"This is your spring, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. The Silver Hollow. Th' Gold Pool is farther south toward th' Black Coulee. There was another one, fine as this, perhaps a better one, up on th' Cup Rim Range, but Courtrey blew her up, damn him! She was called th' Crystal." Kenset caught his breath, mentally, all but physically, and put up a hand to cover his lips.

This *was* another type of woman from any he had ever met, in truth.

The oath, rolling roundly over her full red lips, was as unconscious as the long breath that lifted her breast at the memory of that outrage.

"We replaced her with a well—an' it's a corker.

Mebby better than th' old Crystal, though she was a lovely thing. As clear as—as ice that's frozen hard without a ripple of white. You know that kind?"

"Yes," said Kenset gravely.

"Well," sighed Tharon, "she's gone, an' there ain't no use cryin' over spilt milk. What you ben a-doin' sence I helped you hang th' picture?"

"Won't you sit down?" Kenset stepped aside. "It is uncomfortable to stand through a visit—and I mean to have a long talk-fest with you, if you will be so kind."

Tharon flung herself down at the spring's edge, eased the right gun from under her hip, leaned on her elbow and prepared to listen.

"Fire away," she said.

Kenset laughed.

"For goodness' sake!" he ejaculated, "I said visit. That takes two. What have *you* been doing?"

"Well, everythin', mostly. Made a new shirt for Billy, for one thing. An' I showed Courtrey th' picture o' this."

She patted the blue gun that lay half in her lap, its worn scabbard black against her brown skirt.

Kenset sobered at once. As ever when he let his mind dwell on that dark shadow which sat so lightly on this girl, he had no feeling for mirth.

A very real chill went down his spine and he looked intently into her eyes.

"How?" he asked, "what did you do?"

But Tharon shook her head.

"Nothin' you'd understand," she said quietly.

"I can show you something *you* will understand," he said, and reached for Captain's bridle. He pulled the horse around and pointed to the saddle horn.

"See that?"

She looked up quickly. With the sure instinct of a dweller in a gun man's land she knew the meaning of the splintered wood of the pommel, the torn and ragged leather that had covered it.

"Hell!" she said softly, "where did you get that?"

"At the mouth of Black Coulee, at dusk a week ago."

For a long moment Tharon studied the saddle. Then her gaze dimmed, lengthened, went beyond into infinitude. The pupils of her eyes drew down to tiny points of black against the brilliant blue.

At last she turned and held out a hand, rising from her elbow.

"I beg your pardon, Mister," she said quaintly, "fer that day at the Holdin' an' th' meal I offered an' took, an' fer my words. I know now that you are—that you were—straight. I don't

yet know what you may mean in Lost Valley with your talk of Government, but I do know you ain't a Courtrey man."

Kenset took the hand. It was firm and shapely and vibrant with the young life there was in her. He laid his other one over it and held it in a close clasp for a moment.

"I mean only right," he said, "sanity and law and decency. I think I have a big problem to handle here—aside from my work on the forest —a problem I must solve before I can be effective in that work—and I am more sincerely glad than I can say that my friend, the outlaw, took that warning shot at me. It ruined a perfectly good saddle, but it has made one point clear to you. I am no Courtrey man, and that's a solemn fact."

"An' I ain't ashamed to say I'm glad, too," said Tharon.

So, with the sun shining in the cloud-flecked heavens and the little winds blowing up from the south to ruffle the hair at the girl's temples, these two sat by the Silver Hollow and talked of a thousand things, after the manner of the young, for Kenset found himself reverting to the things of youth in the light of Tharon's grave simplicity.

They looked into each other's eyes and found there strange depths and lights. They were aliens, strangers, groping dimly for a common ground,

and finding little, though presently they fell once more upon the law in Lost Valley and earnestness deepened into gravity.

"Miss Last," said Kenset, thrilling at his daring, "why must this law dwell in these?" and he reached a hand to tap the gun on her lap.

"Why? That very question'd show your ignorance to any Lost Valley man. Because it's all there is. You've seen Courtrey. You've seen Steptoe Service. Can't you judge from them?"

"Surely, so far as they two go. A bad man and a bad sheriff. But they are not all the officers of this County. Where and who is your Superior Judge?"

"Poor ol' Ben Garland. Weaker'n skim milk. Scared to say his soul's his own."

There was infinite scorn in her voice.

"No, it's Steptoe Service, or nothin'."

Kenset thought a moment.

"Who's the Coroner?" he asked presently.

"Jim Banner," she answered quickly, "as straight a man as ever lived. Brave, too. He's been shot at more'n once fer takin' exception to some raw piece o' work in this Valley, fer pokin' his nose in, so to speak. Jim Last used to say he was th' only *man* at the Seat, which is Corvan, you know, of course."

"District Attorney?"

"Tom Nord. Keen as a razor an' married to Courtrey's sister. Now do you see why this is th' law?" She, too, tapped the gun.

Kenset frowned and looked down along the green range. He thought of the unpainted pine building in Corvan which was the Court House. A strange personnel, truly, to invest it with authortity!

"I see," he said briefly, "but there must be some way out. This is not the right way, the way that must come and last."

Tharon's lips drew into the thin line that made them like her father's. "It's th' law that's here," she said and there was an instant coldness in her voice, "an' it's th' law that'll last until Courtrey or I go down."

The man, watching, saw that thinning of the lips, the hardening of all the young lines of her face. He knew he had blundered. Talk was cheap. It was action that counted in Lost Valley.

With a quick motion he reached over and caught the girl's hand and drew it to him, covering it with both of his.

Her eyes followed, came to rest on his face, cool, appraising, waiting.

She was, in all that had counted in his life, crude, untutored, basic.

Yet that calm look made his impulsive action

seem unpardonable in the next second. However a warm surge of feeling shot through him with the quiet resting of that firm brown hand between his own, and he held it tighter. Kenset had thought he was sophisticated, that little or nothing could stir him deeply—not since Ethel Van Riper had gone to Europe as the bride of the old Count of Easthaven. That had been four years back. He had been pretty young then, but the young feel deeply.

Now he held a gun woman's hand in the thin shade of a willow clump in the heart of Lost Valley—and the blood surged in his ears, the levels and slopes danced before his vision.

"Miss Tharon," he said, for the first time using her given name, "I beg your pardon. You are strong, simple, serene. You know your land and its ways. I am an alien, an interloper—but I can't bear to think of you as waiting for the time to kill a man—or to be killed in the killing. It sickens me."

Tharon snatched her hand from his and leaped to her feet.

"Don't talk like that!" she cried passionately, "I don't like to hear it! I thought you were a real man, maybe, but you're not! You—you're a woman! A soft woman—I hate th' breed!"

Her face was flushed, for what reason Kenset,

stunned by her vehement words, could not tell. She flung the rein up and followed it, leaping to saddle like a man.

"I tol' you we couldn't be friends!" she cried, her eyes blazing with sudden fire, "there ain't no manner of use a-tryin'."

Kenset, springing forward, caught El Rey's bit. The stallion reared and struck, but he held him down.

"There is use, Tharon," he panted. "It's vital! Since that day on Baston's steps, when you backed out past me I have had you in my mind—my thoughts by day and night—there *is* use, and I'll keep your hands from blood—Courtrey's or any other—if it takes my life—so help me God!"

The girl leaned down and her blue eyes blazed in his face.

"An' make me false to th' crosses on Jim Last's stone?" she cried. "No—not you or anybody else—could do that trick! Let go!"

The next moment she had whirled out from the flickering shade of the willows and was gone around toward the north—there was only the sound of hoofs ringing on the earth. Kenset, left alone where the Silver Hollow bubbled softly above its snowy sands, passed a trembling hand across his eyes and stood as in a trance.

What did it mean? What had he promised? What vital emotion had gripped him that his usually quiet tongue had rushed into that torrential speech that dealt with life and death? What was Tharon Last to him?

A figure of the old West! A romantic gun woman with her weapons on her hips! A rider of wild horses!

Slowly, as if he had gained an added weight of years, he reined Captain and swung himself up. He rode east from the spring toward the lacy and far-reaching skirts of the forest, and for the first time he saw the rolling country with tragic eyes.

It held deep issues—life and death and the passing or continuing of régimes and and dynasties —but it was a wondrous country, and, come good or bad, it had become his own. He swung around in his saddle and looked far back across the Valley. He saw the golden light on its uncounted acres, the shadow falling at the foot of the great Rockface, the mighty Wall itself with the silver ribbon of the Vestal's Veil falling straight down from the upper rim, the distant town, looking always like a dull gem in a dark setting, and a thrill shot to his heart.

Yes, if he lived to do his work in the hidden

Valley—if he was shot this night on his own doorstep, it was his country.

He who was alien in every way, was yet native.

Something in the depths of him came down as from far distant racial haunts and was at home.

So he rode slowly up among the scattered oaks with his hands folded on the mutilated pommel, and he knew that his lines were definitely cast.

. . . . . .

Tharon Last rode into the Holding and dismounted in unwonted silence.

There was a frown between her brows, an unusual thing. She turned the stallion into his corral, dragged off the big saddle to hang it on its peg, flung the studded bridle on a post.

The men were not in yet. Far toward the north beyond the big corrals she could see the cattle grazing toward home. A surge of savage joy in her possessions flooded over her. These things were her own. They were what Jim Last had worked for all his life.

Not one hoof or hide should Courtrey take without swift reprisal.

Not one inch should he push her from her avowed purpose—not though all the strangers in the world came to Lost Valley and prated of blood-guilt.

But for some vague reason which she could not

have analyzed had she wished, she went to the paled-in garden where the silver waters trickled and searched among the few flowers growing there for some blossom, sweeter, tenderer, more mild and timid than usual for the pale hands of the Virgin in the deep south room.

With the posy in her fingers she slipped quietly to her sanctuary and knelt before the statue, pensive, frowning, vaguely stirred. She whispered the prayers that Anita had taught her, but she found with a start that the words were meaningless, that she was saying them mechanically.

Her mind had been at the Silver Hollow, seeing again the forest man's dark eyes, so grave, so quiet, so deep—her right hand was conscious as it had never been in all her life before. She heard a strange man's condemning voice, felt the warmth of his hands pressed upon hers.

The mistress of Last's shook herself, both mentally and physically, and set herself to resay her prayers.

When she came out to the life and bustle of the ranch house the cattle were streaming into the far corrals under their dust, the riders were shouting, young Paula sang in the kitchen, and Anita passed back and forth about the evening meal.

. . . . . .

There was a slim moon in the west above the

Cañon Country. The skies were softly alight, high and vaulted, deep and mysterious and sweet.

World-silence, profound as eternity, hung tangibly above Lost Valley and the Wall, the eastern ramparts of the shelving mountains, the rocklands at the north. There was little sound in all this sleeping wilderness.

Bird life was rare. The waters that fell at seasons from the open mouths of the cañons half way up the Rockface were dried. Down in the Valley itself there could be seen the lights of Corvan which never went out from dusk to dawn. Far to the north a black blot might have been visible with a fuller moon—Courtrey's herds bedded on the range, the only stock in the Valley so privileged.

Along the foot of the Rockface in the early evening a tiny procession had crawled, three burros, their pack-saddles empty save for a couple of sacks tied across each, and a weazened form that followed them—Old Pete, the snow-packer, bound on his nightly journey to the Cañon Country for the bags of snow for the cooling of the Golden Cloud's refreshments.

He was a little old man, grotesque and misshapen, yet he followed briskly after the burros, which were the fastest travelers of their kind in the land. He rolled on his bandy legs and kept

the little animals on a constant trot with the wisp of stick he carried and the deep, harsh cries that heralded his coming for a mile ahead and sent the echoes reverberating between the cañon walls. A little north of Corvan he had followed the Rock-face close for a distance, then suddenly turned back on his tracks and disappeared, burros and all. This was the invisible entrance to the Cañon Country, a narrow mouth that opened sidewise into the very breast of the thousand-foot Wall and led back along a thin sheet of rock that stood between the gorge and the Valley. The floor of this cut or cañon, which was so narrow that the laden burros had a "narrow squeak" to pass, as Pete said, lifted sharply. It rose smoothly underfoot in the pitch darkness, for the cut was roofed in the living rock five hundred feet above, and climbed for a mile. It was a dead, flat place, without sound, for the footsteps of the burros and the man fell dully on the soft and sliding floor, and it seemed to have no acoustic properties.

At the end of the mile this snake-like split in the solid rock came suddenly out into a broader, more steeply pitched cañon whose walls went straight up to the open skies above. Here there were heaps and piles and long slides of dead stone, weathered and powdered, that had fallen from

time to time from the parent walls. This in turn led up and on to other breaks and splits and cuts, all open, all lifting to the upper world, and all as blind and dangerous to follow as any death-trap that old Dame Nature ever devised. Here, at any cross-cut, any debouching cañon, a man might turn to his undoing, might travel on and up and never reach those beckoning heights, seen clearly from some blind pocket he had wandered into, might never find his way back to the original cañon among the continuous cuts that met and crossed and passed each other among the towering points and sheets.

But Old Pete knew where he was going. Not for nothing had he threaded these passages for fifteen years. He knew the Cañon Country for the lower part better than any man in the Valley, if Courtrey be excepted.

So this night he climbed and shouted to his burros and thought no more of the sounding splits, for here the echoes raved, than he would have thought of the open plains below.

He passed on and up to where a certain cut lay full, year after year, of packed and hardened snow. For fifteen years Old Pete had visited this cut, a deeper drop into the nether world of rock, and cut his supplies from its surface. Every season he took what he needed, leaving a widening

circle at the edge from which he worked, where the cut he traveled passed the mouth of the pent cañon, and every year the snows, sifting from high above, leveled it again. There was no known outlet for this glacier-like pack, no sliding chance, yet it was always on a certain level—each summer seeming to lose just what it gained in winter. It lay level at the mouth of the passing cut, was never filled higher.

Starting at dusk from Corvan, Pete reached his destination around two o'clock, filled his sacks, tied them on his mules and started down, coming out of the Rockface in time to meet the dawn that quivered on the eastern ramparts.

But this night Old Pete, sturdy, fearless, unarmed, was not to see the accustomed pageant of the rising sun, the fleeing veils of shadows shifting on the Valley floor that he had watched with silent joy for all these years.

This night he was well down along his backward way, shouting in the darkness, for the slim moon had dropped down behind the lofty peaks above, when all the echoes in the world, it seemed, let loose in the cañons and all the weight of the universe itself came pressing hard upon his dauntless heart with the crack of a gun.

"Th' price!" whispered Old Pete as he fell sprawling on his face, "fer pure flesh!" With

which cryptic word he bade farewell to the sounding passes, the tenets of manhood as he conceived them, the valour, and the grumbling at life in general.

The little burros, placid and faithful, went on and saw the pageant of the dawn from the hidden gateway in the Wall, crept down the Rockface, single file, and at their accustomed hour stood at their accustomed place before the Golden Cloud.

It was Wan Lee, Old Pete's *bête noir,* who found them there and ran shouting through the crowd of belated players in the saloon's big room, his pig-tail flying, his almond eyes popping, to upset a table and batter on his master's door and scream that the "bullos" were here, "allesame lone," and that there was blood all spattered on the hind one's rump!

CHAPTER VIII

WHITE ELLEN

SO old Pete, the snow-packer, had paid the price of gallantry. The bullet he had averted from Tharon Last's young head that day in the Golden Cloud but sheathed itself to wait for him. All the Valley knew it. Not a soul beneath the Rockface but knew beyond a shadow of a doubt who, or whose agents, had followed Pete that night to the Cañon Country. Whispers went flying about as usual, and as usual nothing happened.

When the news of this came to Last's Holding the mistress sat down at the big desk in the living room, laid her tawny head on her arms and wept.

There was in her a new softness, a new feeling of misery—as if one had wantonly killed a rollicking puppy before her eyes. Those tears were Old Pete's requiem. She dried them quickly, however, and set another notch to her score with Courtrey.

It was then that the waiting game ceased abruptly.

Tharon, riding on El Rey, went in to Corvan.

She tied the horse at the Court House steps and went boldly in to the sheriff's office.

Behind her were Billy, like her shadow, and the sane and quiet Conford.

Steptoe Service, fat and important, was busy at his desk. His spurs lay on a table, his wide hat beside them. The star of his office shone on his suspender strap.

"Step Service," said the girl straightly, "when are you goin' to look into this here murder?"

Service swung round and shot an ugly look at her from his small eyes.

"Have already done so," he said, "ben out an' saw to th' buryin'!"

Tharon gasped.

"Buried him already? How dared you do it?"

"Say," said Service, banging a fist on his table, "I'm th' sheriff of Menlo County, young woman. I ordered him buried."

"Where?"

"What's it to you?"

"Was Jim Banner there?"

"Jim Banner's sick in bed—got th' cholery morbus."

Tharon's eyes began to blaze.

"Bah!" she snapped, "th' time's ripe! Come on, boys," and she whirled from the Court House.

As she ran across the street to where the Finger Marks were tied, she came face to face with Kenset on Captain.

Her face was red from brow to throat, her voice thick with rage.

"You talked o' law, Mr. Kenset," she cried at the brown horse's shoulder, her eyes upraised to his, "an' see what law there is in Lost Valley! Step Service has buried th' snow-packer—without a by-your-leave from nobody! Th' man—or woman—that kills Courtrey now 'counts for three men—Harkness, Last an' Pete. I'm on my way to th' Stronghold."

She whirled again to run for the stallion, but the forest man leaned down and caught her shoulder in a grip of steel.

"Not now," he said in that compelling low voice, "not now. I want to talk to you."

"But I don't want to talk to you!" she flung out, "I'm goin'!"

Over her head Conford's anxious eyes met Kenset's.

"Hold her," they begged plainly, "we can't."

And Kenset held her, by physical strength.

The grey eyes of Billy were on him coldly. The boy was hot with anger at the man. He put a hand on Kenset's arm.

"Let go," he said, but Kenset shook him off.

"Come out on the plain a little way with me, all of you," he said, "this is no place to talk."

Tharon, standing where he had stopped her, her breast heaving, her lips apart, seemed struggling against an unknown force. She put up a hand and tried to dislodge his fingers on her shoulder, but could not.

Presently she wet her lips and looked around the street, already filled with watching folk, then up at Kenset.

"What for?" she asked.

"I think I can tell you something," he answered quietly.

"All right," she said briefly, "let go an' I'll come."

Without a word the man loosed her. She went to El Rey and mounted.

Her riders mounted with her, Billy's face frowning and set. From the steps of Baston's store a few cowboys watched. There were no Stronghold men in town, for it was too early in the day.

In silence Kenset led out of town at a brisk canter. His lips were set, his eyes very grave.

In the short gallop that followed while they cleared the skirts of the town, he did some swift thinking, settled some heavy questions for himself.

He was about to take a decided step, to put

himself on record in something that did not concern his work in the Valley.

He was going directly opposite to the teaching of his craft. He was about to take sides in this thing, when he had laid down for himself rigid lines of non-partisanship. His mind was working swiftly.

If he flung himself and his knowledge of the outside world and the law into this thing he sunk abruptly the thing for which he had come to Lost Valley—the middle course, the influence for order that he had hoped to establish that he might do his work for the Government.

But he could not help it. At any or all costs he must stop this blue-eyed girl from riding north to challenge Courtrey on his doorstep.

The blood congealed about his heart at the thought.

Where the rolling levels came up to the confines of the town they rode out far enough to be safe from eavesdroppers, halted and faced each other.

"Miss Last," said Kenset gently, "I'm a stranger to you. I have little or no influence with you, but I beg you to listen to me. You say there is no help for the conditions existing in Lost Valley. That outrage follows outrage. True. I grant the thing is appalling. But there is redress.

There is a law above the sheriff, when it can be proven that that officer has refused to do his duty. That law is invested in the coroner. Your coroner can arrest your sheriff. He can investigate a murder—he can issue a warrant and serve it anywhere in the State. He can subpoena witnesses. Did you know that?"

Tharon shook her head.

"Nor you?" he asked Conford.

"I knew somethin' like that—but what's th' use? Banner's a brave man, but he's got a family. An' he's been only one against th' whole push. What could he do when there wasn't another man in th' Valley dared to stand behind him? You saw what happened to Pete. He struck up Courtrey's arm when he shot at Tharon one night last spring. Th' same thing'd happen to Banner if he tried to pull off anythin' like that."

A light flamed up in Kenset's eyes.

"If you, Miss Last," he said straightly, "will give me your word to do no shooting, something like that will be pulled off here, and shortly."

He looked directly at Tharon, and for the first time in her life she felt the strength of a gaze she couldn't meet—not fully.

But Tharon shook her head.

"I'm sworn," she said simply.

Kenset's face lost a bit of colour. Billy, watch-

ing, turned grey beneath his tan. He saw something which none other did, a thing that darkened the heavens all suddenly.

"Then," said Kenset quietly, "we'll have to do without your promise and go ahead anyway. We'll ride back to town, demand of Service a proper investigation by a coroner's jury, and begin at the bottom."

Tharon moved uneasily in her saddle.

"Why are you doin' this?" she asked. "Why are you mixin' up in our troubles? Why don't you go back to your cabin an' your pictures an' books an' things, an' let us work out our own affairs?"

Kenset lifted a quick hand, dropped it again.

"God knows!" he said. "Let's go."

And he wheeled his horse and started for Corvan, the others falling into line at his side.

When Kenset, quietly impervious to the veiled hostility that met him everywhere, faced Steptoe Service and made his request, that dignitary felt a chill go down his spine. Like Old Pete he felt the man beneath the surface. He met him, however, with bluster and refused all reopening of a matter which he declared settled with the burial of the snow-packer in the sliding cañons where he was found.

"Very well," said Kenset shortly, "you see I have witnesses to this," and he turned on his heel and went out.

"Now, Miss Last," he said when they were in the wholesome summer sunlight once more, "if you have any friends whom you think would stand for the right, send for them."

"Th' Vigilantes," said the girl, "we'll gather them in twenty-four hours."

"The Vigilantes?"

"Th' settlers," said Conford.

"All right. Until they are here we'll guard the mouth of this cañon that leads into the Rock-face, as I understand it. Now take me to this man Banner."

At a low, rambling house in the outskirts of Corvan they found Jim Banner, sitting on the edge of his bed, undeniably sick from some acute attack. His eyes were steady, however, and he listened in silence while Kenset talked.

"Mary," he said, "bring me my boots an' guns. I been layin' for this day ever sence I been in office. I wisht Jim Last was here to witness it."

In two hours Kenset was on his way to the blind mouth of the pass that led into the Cañon Country, Tharon was shooting back to the Holding on El Rey to put things on a watching basis there,

while Conford and Billy went south and west to rouse the Vigilantes.

With Kenset rode Banner, weak and not quite steady in his saddle, but a fighting man notwithstanding.

All through the golden hours of that noonday while he jogged steadily on Captain, Kenset was thinking. He had food for thought, indeed. He carried a gun at last—he who had ridden the Valley unarmed, had meant never to carry one. He felt a stir within him of savagery, of excitement.

He meant to have justice done, to put a hard hand on the law of Lost Valley. Murders uninvestigated, cattle stolen at will, settlers' homes burned over their heads, their hearths blown up by planted powder when they returned from any small trip, their horses run off—these things had seemed to him preposterous, mere shadows of facts. Now they were down to straight points before him, tangible, solid. He got them from the blue eyes of Tharon Last, the gun woman, and he had taken sides! He who had meant to keep so far out of the boiling turmoil.

He camped that night at the base of the Wall where the blind door entered, made his bed just inside the dead black passage, and watched while Banner, weary and still weak, slept in his blankets beside him.

This was new work for Kenset, strange work, this waiting for men who called themselves the Vigilantes—for a slim golden girl who rode and swore and pledged herself to blood!

More than once in the quiet night that followed, Kenset wiped a hand across his brow and found it moist with sweat.

What did he mean? Again and again he asked himself that question.

What did he mean by Tharon Last? What was this cold fire that burned him when he thought of her pulling those sinister blue guns on Courtrey? Did he fear to see her kill Courtrey—to see that shadowy stain on her hands—or did he fear something worse, infinitely worse—to see Courtrey, famous gun man, beat her to it!

He shuddered and sweat in the clear cold of the starlit night and searched his bewildered heart. He could find no answer save and except the weary one that Tharon Last must be holden from her sworn course.

Tharon Last who looked at him with those deep blue eyes and spoke so coolly of this promised killing! He recalled the earnest frown between her brows, the simple directness of her duty as she saw it and told it to him.

Either way—either way—she was lost to him

forever—There he caught himself and started all over again.

What was she to him?

What could she ever be? She with her strange soul, *her lack of soul!*

What did he want her to be? One moment he ached with her loveliness—the next he shuddered at her savagery.

He did not want her to be anything! Why not go out to the dim and half-remembered world that he had left, the world of lights, padded floors and marble steps, leave this impossible land with its blood and wrongs? Nay, he could not leave Lost Valley. He was as much a part of it as the grim Rockface itself, the Vestal's Veil eternally shimmering in its thousand feet of beauty. Life or death, for Kenset, it must be here.

So he waited and listened and watched the stars wheeling in everlasting majesty, and he found his hands falling now and again upon the gun-butts at his sides!

Near dawn Banner awoke, refreshed and stronger, and made him lie down for a few hours' sleep.

When he awoke the sun was well up along the heavens and Banner was offering him a piece of dry bread and some jerky, spiced and smoked and

as dry and sweet as anything he had ever eaten in all his life.

"They're comin'," said the man, "thar's five comin' from down along th' Wall at th' south—that'll be Jameson, Hill and Thomas, an' some others—an' I see about ten or twelve, near's I can make out, driftin' in from up toward th' Pomo settlement. Thar's a dust cloud movin' up from th' Bottle Neck, too. They'll be here by one o'clock at th' furdest."

And they were, a grim, silent group of men, determined, watchful, bent on the second step of the program to which they had pledged themselves that night at Last's Holding. Tharon was there, too, and with her Bent Smith on Golden.

It was a goodly number who left their horses in charge of Hill and Dixon at the blind mouth and entered the long black cut. They climbed in low spoken quiet, their voices sounding back upon them with an odd dead effect. They went faster than Old Pete was wont to travel, for they meant to reach the spot of the tragedy before the early shadows should begin to sift down from the high world above. Tharon went eagerly, her eyes dilated.

Always she had dreamed of the Cañon Country. Always she had wondered what it was like. When she left the mouth of the black roofed cut

and came out into the narrow, rockwalled cañon with its painted faces reaching up into the very skies, she gasped with amaze. Above her head she could see the endless cuts and cross-cuts, the standing spires and narrow wedgelike walls that made a labyrinthian maze.

Billy, close beside her, as always, watched her with a pensive sadness.

And so the Vigilantes went in and up along the lower ways. There were those among them who had been here before, who from time to time had accompanied the snow-packer on his nightly trips just for the curiosity of the thing. These several men, among whom were Albright from the Pomo settlement—a squawman—took the lead, and Albright, keen as a hound on trail, picked up Old Pete's marks and signs at a running walk.

And so it was, that, while the sun was still shining on the high peaks above and the cañons were filled with a strange pink light reflected from the red and yellow faces of the rock, the Vigilantes came suddenly to a halt, for Albright had stopped.

"Here's where it happened," he said, "there's a blood-sign." And he pointed to the Wall at a spot about breast high. A thin dark line, no wider than a blade of grass and about as long, spraying out to nothing at the upper end, leaned along the

rock like a native marking. No other eye had seen it. Not one in a thousand would have seen it.

"Good," said Kenset, "you're the man for more of this."

They crowded around and examined the telltale spray.

Not one among them but knew it for the stain of blood.

From that they spread out and back to search the sliding heaps of dust-like powdery rock-slide that lay everywhere along the walls.

It took Albright five minutes by Kenset's watch to find the disturbed and clumsily smoothed dump which held all that was mortal of the snow-packer.

"Miss Last," said Kenset as the men began to dig with the spades brought along for the purpose, "you had best step back a bit."

But Tharon pushed nearer.

"This is my work," she said with dignity. "I started this, I think."

It was a pitiful job that Service and those with him had done for Old Pete. Rolled head-first into a shallow hole—no doubt with jest and laughter—it was his booted foot which first came to view, sticking grotesquely up through the loose slide-stuff.

It was brief work and grim work that fol-

lowed, and soon the weazened form, bent and stiffened into something hardly human, lay in the soft pink light on the cañon's floor.

Jim Banner knelt and examined it carefully and minutely, then every man in the group did likewise. They found evidence of one simple, staring fact—Old Pete had been shot squarely from behind, a little to the left.

The bullet had undoubtedly pierced the heart—a great gaping hole in the left centre of the breast in front attesting its course.

"Here," said Albright, coming back from a short distance down, beneath the spray on the wall, "here's where something was taken up from th' floor—th' blood he lost, I make no doubt."

"Gentlemen,—Miss Last," said Kenset, "I move we all move back and leave the ground to Albright. There is fine work here."

With one accord the mass moved back, clearing a goodly space.

In the immediate vicinity there was little chance of doing anything, for Service's bunch, and themselves, had trampled over the soft floor until all original traces of the murder were blotted out.

Albright looked around and seemed to hesitate.

"Me, alone?" he asked. "Gimme Dick Compos, there."

"Done," said Kenset.

A tall, silent half-breed stepped forward and without another word the two began to scan the walls, the floors, the heaps of rotted rock, the loose and tumbled boulders, not yet decomposed, that lined the cut on both sides.

They stood in their tracks and looked, and the concentration in their eyes was akin to that in the eyes of a wild animal, hiding, hard-pressed, and looking for a loophole for life.

The Vigilantes watched them in silence.

Presently Dick Compos stepped forward, leaned down and searched the wall at the left. Then he went forward, bent over, scanning each inch. He looked above and below, the height of a man's shoulders, his hips, his knees.

Then he crept back, stopped at a particular upstanding piece of stone, searched it closely—stepped in behind.

When he came out he looked over at Tharon Last standing at the head of her people.

"Some one went along th' Wall here," he waved a slender brown hand at the cañon face. "Three signs—here—here—here."

He indicated the heights he had scanned. They stepped a bit nearer and looked. Several pairs of Valley eyes saw what Dick Compos had seen, a sign so fine that few would have called it that—merely a brushing, a smoothing of the fine-sand-

stone surface where a man's shoulders, his hips, his knees might have pressed had he stood waiting there.

A bit nearer the standing pinnacle of rock, they were evident again.

With one accord they turned and looked down the cañon to where that thin line sprayed the face. A close shot, such as would be necessary in the darkness of the cut. Albright and Compos both stepped to the rock and stood looking with those narrowed, concentrated eyes.

Suddenly Albright, looking back across his shoulders, moved like a cat and picked up something from ten feet away.

He held it on his palm—an empty shell, such as fitted a .44 Smith and Wesson.

He scanned it minutely, turned it over this way and that, looked at it fore and aft.

"Firin' pin's nicked," he said, "an' a leetle off centre."

For ten minutes the thing went from hand to hand.

Then Kenset gave it to the coroner.

"There's your clew, Mr. Banner," he said. "Now we can begin. Let us be going back to Corvan."

And so it was that Old Pete, the snow-packer, went back in state to the Golden Cloud, by relays

on men's shoulders down the sounding passes, through the dead cut, by pack-horse across the levels, lashed stiffly to the saddle, a pitiful burden.

Tharon Last, riding close after the calm fashion of a strong man in the face of tragedy, thought pensively of that night in spring when this little old man had taken his life in his hands to save her own.

It was a gift he had given her, nothing less, and she made up her mind that Old Pete should sleep in peace under the pointing pine at Last's Holding—and that his cross should also stand beside those other two in the carved granite.

Billy, watching, read her mind with the half-tragic eyes of love.

Kenset, seemingly unconscious, but keenly alive to everything, was at great loss to do so.

He hoped, with a surging tenseness, that this fateful thing was sliding over into his hands to work out, his and Banner's. He knew full well that he and Banner both were like to be slated for an early death, but he did not care. In Corvan, night had fallen when the cavalcade passed through.

Bullard of the Golden Cloud had the grace to come out and look at the little old man who had worked for him so long and faithfully. But

that was all. They carried him home to Last's and buried him decently at dawn.

Then the Vigilantes again rode out. At their head was Tharon; though both Kenset and Billy tried to dissuade her.

At Corvan, Banner went through the town like a wind, asking for the gun of every man he met. By noon every .44 had been examined, one shell exploded. Not one left the nicked, uneven sign of the mysterious hammer which had snapped its death into Old Pete's heart.

When the sun was straight overhead and all Lost Valley was sweet with the summer haze, the Vigilantes, close packed and silent, swung out toward the Stronghold.

It was blue-dusk when they drew up at the corrals beside the fortress house. Lounging around in cat-like quiet were some thirty men, riders, gun men, *vaqueros*.

When Banner called for Courtrey there was a sound of boots on the board floors, inside, a woman's pleading voice, and the cattle king came swinging out, his hands at his waist, his two guns covering the crowd.

Tall, straight as a lance, his iron-grey head uncovered, he was a striking figure of a man. His henchmen watched him sharply. At his side clung the slim woman, Ellen, her milky face thin and

tragic. He shook her loose and faced the newcomers.

"Well?" he snapped, "what's this?"

"Courtrey," said Banner, "we're here in th' name o' th' law. We demand t' see them guns o' yours."

If the knowledge that Jim Banner was a brave man needed confirmation, it had it in that speech. Few men in the world could have made it, and gotten away with it. None in a different setting. Courtrey heard it, but he paid little heed to it at the moment. His eyes went to the face of Tharon Last and drank in its beauty hungrily.

Presently he shifted his gaze and regarded Kenset with a cold light that was evil.

"Who wants 'em?" he asked drawlingly.

"We do."

"Hell! Want *Courtrey's* guns! You're modest, Jim.

"An' what do you want, Tharon?"

In spite of the tenseness of the moment the voice that had laughed at death and torture in Round Valley became melting soft as it addressed the girl.

"Law!" said Tharon, "Law—th' law I promised you on Baston's porch!"

"Yes? An' how do you think you'll get that? If I nod my head we'll drive this bunch o' spawn

out o' here so quick it'll make your head swim! What do you think you're doin'?"

"I don't *think*. I *know* now. Know what we can do—what th' law means."

Courtrey glanced again at Kenset.

"Got some imported knowledge, I take it."

"Take it or leave it! Show us them guns!" cried Tharon harshly.

"I—don't—think—so," said Courtrey, nodding.

Like a pair of snakes gliding forward, Wylackie Bob and the Arizona stranger were suddenly in the foreground, hands hanging apparently loose and careless, in reality tense as strung wires, ready to snap with fire and lead.

The moment was pregnant. The very air seemed charged with danger and death.

Then, with a strange cry, Tharon Last swung sidewise from her saddle, for all the world as if she were breaking under the strain, leaned far over El Rey's shoulder, and the next moment there came a shot, snapping in the stillness.

With an oath and a lurch Courtrey flung backward, tossed up his right arm, and fired with his left. His ball went high in the air, wild. The blood from that tossed right hand spurted over Wylackie Bob beside him, the gun it had held went hurtling away along the earth.

There was a movement, a surge, the flash of guns and one of the settlers tumbled from his saddle, poor Thomas of the doubting heart. Courtrey's men flashed together as one, thundered backward to the wide doorstep, pressed together, waited. The voice of Kenset rang like a clarion.

"Stop!" he cried, "don't shoot!"

And he swung off his horse to leap for that gun.

But another was before him.

With a scream of anguish that rang neaven-high, Ellen shot forward and snatched it from the spot where it had fallen.

Tall, white as a ghost in the rose-pink light that was tinged with purple, she stood, swaying on her feet, and faced them.

And she put the gun to her temple!

"I ain't got nothin' t' live for," she said clearly and pitifully, "but Courtrey's life is worth what I got to me. If you don't clear out I'll pull th' trigger."

She was tragic as death itself. The big blue wells of her eyes were black with the spreading pupils. Dark circles lay beneath them.

Her blue-veined hands were so thin the light seemed to shine through them.

Her long white dress clung to her slim form. From far back by the corral fence Cleve Whit-

more watched her silently, his hands clenched hard.

Tharon Last looked at her with wide eyes. She had forgotten all about this woman in the passionate hatred of Courtrey and the desire to pin his crimes upon him. Now she wet her lips and looked at Ellen long and silently. The pale lips were quivering, the long arm shook as it held the gun.

"God!" whispered the girl, watching, "she loves him! Like I loved Jim Last! Th' pain's in her heart, an' no mistake!"

Then, as if something strong within her folded its iron arm upon itself, she began to back El Rey. "Back out!" she called, "we ain't no woman-killers!"

With one accord, carefully, watching, the Vigilantes began to back, counting the seconds, expecting each moment to witness the most pitiful thing Lost Valley with all its crimes, had ever seen.

Some one lifted the body of Thomas and swung it across a horse.

Back to the corner of the house, around, they went, and finally, out in front they turned as one man and rode away from the Stronghold—and Jim Banner was swearing like a fury, steadily, in a high-pitched voice.

"Failed!" he cried between his oaths, "failed in our biggest job! That's th' gun, all right, all right, an' that damned woman beat us to it! Beat us to it with her fool's courage an' her sickenin' love! Oh, t' hell with Courtrey an' all this Valley! I'm a-goin' t' move down th' Wall, s'help me!"

But Tharon Last forged to his side and gripped his arm in her strong fingers.

"Shut up, Jim Banner," she said tensely. "You've only begun. That's th' gun, I make no doubt, an' Ellen knew it—but if we're worth killin' we'll dig into this harder'n ever. Here's poor Thomas, makes one more notch on my record. I'm not sayin' quit! An' you're th' bravest man in Corvan, too!"

At Last's Holding the Vigilantes stopped for rest and food.

They had been in saddle the better part of forty-eight hours.

Young Paula, José and Anita set up a steaming meal, and they ate like famished men, by relays at the big table in the dining room.

Tharon Last sat quietly at the board's head throughout the meal, pensive, thinking of Ellen, but grimly planning for the future.

And Billy and Kenset watched her, each with a secret pain at his heart.

"Lord, Lord," said Billy to himself, "she's listenin' when he speaks like she never listened to any one before!"

In Kenset's mind drilled over and over again the ceaseless thought "A hand or a heart—she could hit them both with ease. It's true, true,—she's a gun woman! Oh, Tharon, Tharon!" and he did not know he spoke her name beneath his breath.

But other things were crowding forward—he was leaning forward telling that circle of grim, lean faces, that if they could not handle this thing themselves, there were those in the big world of below who could—that there were men of the Secret Service who could find that gun no matter where Courtrey or Ellen hid it, that Lost Valley, no matter what its isolation or its history, was yet in the U. S. A., and could be tamed.

Then the Vigilantes were gone with jangle of spur and bit-chain, and he was the last to go, standing by Captain in the dim starlight. Tharon stood beside him, and for some unaccountable reason the grim purpose of their acquaintance seemed to drift away, to leave them together, alone under the stars, a man and a maid. Kenset stood for a long moment and looked at the faint outline of her face. She was still in her riding clothes, her

head bare with its ribbon half untied in the nape of her slender neck.

The tree-toads were singing off by the spring-house and the cattle in the big corrals made the low, ceaseless night-sounds common to a herd.

The riders were gone, the *vaqueros* were at their posts around the resting stock, the low adobe house was settling into the quiet of the night.

Miserably Kenset looked at this slip of a girl.

She was strange to him, unfathomable. There were depths beneath the changing blue eyes which appalled him. How would he feel toward her when the thing was done—when she had killed Courtrey?

But she must not be allowed to do it. Not though it took his life.

If she was pledged to this thing, he was no less pledged to its prevention.

He felt a sadness within him as he saw the soft curve of her cheek, the outline of her tawny head.

With an impulse which he could not govern he reached out suddenly and took her hands in his and pressed them against his heart. The pounding of that heart was noticeable through her hands into his.

But he did not speak—he could not.

But he had no need. He could have said noth-

ing that would have cleared the situation, would have told himself or her what was in that pounding heart of his—for to save his life he did not know.

And Tharon frowned in the darkness and drew her hands from under those pressing ones.

"Mr. Kenset," she said steadily, "you're always tryin' to make me weak, to break me down with words an' looks an' touches. These hands o' yours,—*damn 'em,* they *do* make me weak! Don't put 'em on me again!"

And with a sudden, sharp savagery she struck his hands off his breast, whirled away in the darkness and was gone.

CHAPTER IX

SIGNAL FIRES IN THE VALLEY

KENSET, two days later, gave Sam Drake a check for five hundred dollars and a letter, unpostmarked but sealed with tape and wax. Drake, who owned some half-breed Ironwoods, rode the best one down the Wall.

Kenset had cautioned him not to talk before he left—he feared Drake's propensity for speech. But he was the only man in Lost Valley whom he felt he could approach.

With the courier's departure he rode back to the Holding and told Tharon and Conford what he had done.

"These men are the best to be had," he said, "and they will go anywhere on earth for money."

But Tharon frowned and struck a fist into a soft palm.

"What you mean?" she cried, "by takin' my work out of my hands like this? I won't have it! I won't wait!"

"What I meant when I caught your bridle that

day in the glade," answered the man, "to stop you from bloodshed."

Then he went back to his cabin and his interrupted work and set himself to wait in patience for the return of Drake.

But in Lost Valley a leaven was rising. It had begun insidiously to work with the appearance of Kenset in Tharon's band at Courtrey's doorstep. It burst up like a mushroom with a chance remark made by Lola of the Golden Cloud—Lola, who had seen, since that night in spring when Tharon Last stood in the door and promised to "get" her father's killer, that Courtrey was slipping from her. A woman like Lola is hard to deceive.

Much experience had taught her to feel the change of winds in the matter of allegiance.

She knew that surely and swiftly this man had gone down the path of unreasoning love, that he would give anything he possessed, do anything possible, to win for himself this slim mistress of Last's Holding.

Therefore she played the one card she held, hoping to rouse the bully, and did just the thing she was trying to avert.

"Buck," she said, her black head on his shoulder, her dark eyes watching covertly his careless face, "the Last girl is lost to every Valley

man. Sooner or later she'll leave the country, mark my word, with this Forest Service fellow, for she's in love with him, though she doesn't know it yet."

With a slow movement Courtrey loosed his arm about Lola and lifted her from him. His eyes were narrowed as he looked into her face.

"For God's sake!" he said, "what makes you think that?"

"Knowledge," said Lola, "long knowledge of women and men."

"If I thought that," said Courtrey slowly, his eyes losing sight of her as he seemed to look beyond her. "If—I—thought that—why, hell! If that's th' truth—why, it—it's th' lever!"

And he rose abruptly, though he had just settled himself in Lola's apartment for a pleasant chat, as was his habit whenever he rode in from the Stronghold.

"Lola," he said presently, "I might's well tell you that I'm plannin' to have this girl for mine, —*mine,* you understand, legally, by law. I can't have her like I've had you. She'd blow my head off th' first time I stopped holdin' her hands." He laughed at the picture he had conjured, then went on.

"An' so I feel grateful to you, old girl, for that remark. It sets me thinkin'." And he stooped and

kissed her on the lips. The woman returned the kiss, a wonderful caress, slow, soft, alluring, but the man did not notice.

His face was flushed, his eyes studying.

Then he swung quickly out through the Golden Cloud, and Lola slipped limply down on a couch and covered her ashen cheeks with her hands.

"Oh, Buck!" she whispered brokenly, "Oh, Buck! Buck!"

Courtrey went straight home, still, cold, thinking hard. His henchmen left him in solitude after the first word or two. They knew him well, and that something was brewing.

At midnight that night he roused Wylackie Bob, Black Bart and the man who was known as Arizona, and the four of them went out on the levels for a secret talk.

The next day the master of the Stronghold rode away on Bolt. As he left, Ellen, standing in the doorway like a pale ghost, lifted her tragic eyes to his face with the look of a faithful dog.

"Where you goin', Buck?" she asked timidly.

"Off," said the man shortly.

"Ain't you goin'—goin' to kiss me?"

He laughed cruelly.

"Not after what I ben a-hearin', I ain't!"

She sprang forward, catching at his knee.

"What—what you ben a-hearin'? There ain't nothin' about me you could a-heard, Buck, dear! Nothin' in this world! I ben true to you as your shadow!"

Every soul within hearing knew the words for the utter and absolute truth, yet Courtrey looked at Wylackie Bob, at Arizona, and laughed.

"Like hell, you have!" he said, struck the Ironwood and was gone around the corner of the house with the sound of thunder.

Ellen wet her lips and looked around like a wounded animal.

Her brother Cleve, saddling up a little way apart, cast a long studying glance at Wylackie and Arizona. He jerked the cinch so savagely that the horse leaped and struck.

For four days there was absolute dearth at the Stronghold.

Courtrey did not return. Ellen timidly tried to find out from the *vaqueros* where he had gone, but they evaded her.

Then, on the morning of that day, Steptoe Service, grinning and important, came to the Stronghold and served on Ellen a summons in suit for divorce.

She met him at the door and invited him in, timidly and shyly, but he stood on the stone and made known his business.

At first she did not understand, was like a child told something too deep for its intellect to grasp, bewildered.

Then, when Service made it brutally plain, she slipped down along the doorpost like a wilted lily and lay long and white on the sand-scrubbed floor. Her women, loving her desperately, gathered her up and shut the door in the sheriff's face.

They sent for Cleve, and not even the presence of Black Bart in the near corral could keep the brother from running into the darkened room where Ellen lay, too stunned to rally.

"Damn him!" he gritted, falling on his knees beside her, "this's what's come of it! I ben lookin' for something of its like. Let him go. We'll leave Lost Valley, Ellen. We'll go out an' start another life, begin all over again. We're both too young to be floored by a man like Courtrey. Let him go."

But the woman turned her waxen face to the wall and shook her head.

"There ain't no life in this world for me without Buck," she whispered. "If he don't want me, I don't want myself."

"You dont' want to hang to him, do you, Sis?" begged the man, "don't want to stay at th' Stronghold after this?"

"Rather stay here under Buck's feet like th' poorest of his dogs than be well-off somewheres where I couldn't never see him again, never look in his face."

"God!" groaned Cleve, "you love him like that!"

"Yes," said Ellen, wearily, "like that."

"Then by th' Eternal!" swore Cleve softly, "here you'll stay if it takes all th' law in th' United States to keep you here. I'll file your answer to-morrow—protest to th' last word!"

And he rode into Corvan, only to find that Courtrey and Courtrey's influence had been there before him, that a cold sense of disaster seemed to permeate the town and all those whom he met therein.

He found the "Court House crowd" tight-lipped and careful.

And Ben Garland set the day for trial at a ridiculously early date, for all the world as if the thing had been cut and dried at some secret conclave.

Courtrey was playing his game with a daring hand, true to his name and habit.

Dusk was falling in Lost Valley. The long blue shadows had swept out from the Rockface, covering first the homesteads under the Wall, then

the great grazing stretches, then Corvan, then the open levels again, then the mouth of Black Coulee and lastly sweeping eastward to hush the life at Last's Holding in that soft, sweet quiet which comes with the day's work done.

Out at the corrals Billy and Conford, Jack and Bent and Curly, put the finishing touches to the routine of precaution which the Holding never relaxed, day or night.

Inside the dusky living room where the bright blankets glowed on the walls and the *ollas* hung in the deep window places, Tharon Last sat at the little old melodeon and played her nameless tunes. She did not look at the yellowed keys. Instead her blue eyes, deep and glowing, wandered down along the southern slopes and she was lost in unconscious dreams. Once again she saw the trim figure of the forest man as she had seen him come stiffly into her range of vision that day in Corvan. She recalled his quiet eyes, dark and speaking, the odd way his hair went straight back from his forehead. She wondered why she should think of him at all.

He was against her—was a force that played directly against all her plans of life, her precepts. Moreover, she had told him she feared he was soft—like a woman—some women—that there was in him a lack of the straight man-

courage which was the only standard in Lost Valley.

And yet—she waited on his word, somehow—held her hand from her sworn duty for a while, waiting—for what?

Ah, she knew! Deep in the soul of her she knew, vaguely and dimly to be sure, but she knew that it was for the time when the die should be cast—that he might prove himself for what he was.

For some vague reason she knew she would not kill Courtrey until this man stood by.

She wondered what Courtrey meant by this strange quiet following the tragic moment at the Stronghold steps when the Vigilantes had challenged him and ridden away.

And then, all suddenly, into her dreaming there came the sound of a horse's hoofs on the sounding-board without—slow hoofs, uncertain. For one swift second that sound, coming out of the dusk with its uncertainty, sent a chill of memory down her nerves. So had come El Rey that night in spring when he brought Jim Last home to die!

She rose swiftly and silently and stepped to the western door.

There, in the shadows and the softness of coming night, a horse loomed along the green stretch, came plodding up to stop and stand before her, a

brown horse, with the stirrups of his saddle hung on the pommel, his rein tied short up—Captain, the good, common friend of Kenset—of the—foothills!

Tharon felt the blood pour back upon her heart and stay there for an awful moment. She put up a hand and touched her throat, and to save her life she did not know why this sudden sickening fear should come upon her.

She had seen men killed, had known tragedy and loss and heartache, but never before had she seen the crest of the distant Wall to dance upon the pale skyline so. Then she whirled into the house and her young voice pealed out a call—Billy, Conford, Bent—she drew them to her running through the deep house—to point to the silent messenger and question them with wide blue eyes where fear rose up like a living thing.

Billy at her shoulder, looked not at Captain, but at her.

A sigh lifted his breast, but he stifled it at birth and turned with the others back toward the corrals. Tharon, running toward the deep room where the Virgin stood in Her everlasting beauty, unfastened her soft white dress as she ran. Inside she flung herself on her knees before the Holy Mother and poured out a trembling prayer.

"Not that! Oh, Mary, not that! Let it not be *that!*" she whispered thickly. Then she was up, into her riding clothes—was out where the boys were hurriedly saddling the Finger Marks. Presently she was on El Rey and shooting like a silver shaft in the summer dusk down along the green levels toward the east. They rode in silence, Conford, Bent, Jack, Curly, Billy and herself, and a thousand thoughts were boiling miserably in two hearts.

El Rey, Golden, Redbuck, Drumfire, Westwind and Sweetheart, they went down along the sounding dark plain, a magnificent band. The whole earth seemed to resound to the thunder of their going, and for once in their lives her beauties could not run fast enough for the mistress of Last's.

They went like the wind itself, and yet they were slow to Tharon.

Out of the open levels there swung up to meet them and to fade into the night, the standing willows by the Silver Hollow. The sloping stretches began to lift, dotted by the oaks and digger-pines for whose sake Kenset had come to Lost Valley. They shot through them, up along the sharply lifting skirts of the hills, in between the guarding pines that formed the gateway to the little glade where the singing stream went

down and the cabin stood at the head. Tharon's throat was tight, as if a hand pressed hard upon it. The high tops of the pines seemed to cut the sky grotesquely. There was no light at the dim log house, no sound in the silent glade. Off to the right they heard the low of the little red cow which served the forest man with milk.

They pounded to a sliding stop in the cabin's yard and Conford called sharply into the silent darkness.

"Kenset! Hello—Kenset!"

Tharon held her breath and listened. There was no sound except a night bird calling from the highest pine-tip.

Carefully the men dismounted.

"You stay up, Tharon, dear," the foreman said quietly, "until we look around."

But to save her life the girl could not. What was this trembling that seized her limbs? Why did the stars, come out on the purple sky, shift so strangely to her eyes? She slipped off El Rey and stood by his shoulder waiting. Conford struck a flare and lit a candle, holding it carefully before him, shielding it with his palm behind it to throw the gleam away from his face, into the cabin. The pale light illumined the whole interior, and it was empty. The keen eyes of the riders went over every inch of space before they entered—

along the walls, in the bed, under the tables. Then they filed in and Tharon followed, gazing around with eyes that ached behind their lids. There on the northern wall between the windows, was the great spread of the beautiful picture she had helped the forest man to hang. There were his books on the table's edge. She looked twice—the last one on the pile at a certain corner was just as she had placed it there, a trifle crooked with the edge, but neatly in line with those beneath it. There was the big chair in which she had waited while he made the little meal—there was his desk in the ingle nook, his maps upon it. It was all so familiar, so filled with his personality, that Tharon felt the very power of his dark eyes, smiling, grave——

"Hello!" said Jack Masters suddenly. "Burt, what's this?"

Conford stepped quickly around the table and held his candle down.

Tharon pushed forward and looked over the leaning shoulders.

There on the brown and green grass rug a rich dark stain was drying—blood, some three days old.

Then, indeed, did the universe sag and darken to the Mistress of Last's.

She put out a hand to steady herself and found

it grasped in the strong one of Billy, who stood at her shoulder like her shadow.

"Steady!" he whispered. "Steady, Tharon."

She drew her trembling fingers across her eyes, wet her lips which felt dry as ashes. The same ache that had come with Jim Last's final smile was already in her heart, but intensified a thousand times. She felt all suddenly, as if there was nothing in Lost Valley worth while, nothing in all the world! That drying stain at her feet seemed to shut out the sun, moon and stars with its sinister darkness. She felt a nausea at the pit of her stomach, a need for air in her cramped lungs.

Strange, she had never known that one could be so detached from all familiar things, could seem so lost in a sea of stupid agony. Why was it so? If this dark blot of blood had come from the veins of Billy now, of Conford, or Jack or Curly, her own men, would she have lost her grip like this? And then she became dully conscious that Billy had put her in the big chair by the table and had joined the others in their exhaustive search for any clew to the tragedy. She saw the moon rising over the tops of the pine trees at the glade's edge, heard the little song of the running stream.

That was the little stream that Kenset had looked for in his ideal spot, this was the home he had made for himself, these were the things of the

other life he had known, these soft, dark pictures, the books on the tables, the brass things shining in the light from the lamp. . . . She knew that she was cold in the summer night, that she was staring miserably out of the open door, scarcely conscious of the scattered voices of her men, searching, searching, hunting, in widening circles outside. . . . Then they came back talking in low voices and she roused herself desperately. Her limbs were stiff when she rose from the big chair, her hands were icy.

"No use, Tharon," said Conford quietly, "we can't find a damned thing. If Courtrey's bunch killed Kenset they made a clean get-away with all evidence. That much has th' new law done in th' Valley—killed th' insolence of th' gun man. Let's go home."

It was Billy, faithful and still, who helped her —for the first time in her life!—to mount a horse. She went up on El Rey as if she were old. Then they were riding down the smooth floor of the little glade, leaving that darkened cabin at its head to stand in tragic loneliness.

She saw the tops of the guarding pines at the gateway, rode out between them. The moon was up in majesty, and by its light Jack Masters suddenly leaned down to look at something, pulled up, swept down from his saddle, cowboy fashion,

hanging by a foot and a hand, and picked up something which he examined keenly.

"Look," he said quickly, "th' beet-man's badge!"

He held out on his palm a small dark object, the copper-coloured shield which had shone on Kenset's breast!

Its double-tongued fastener was twisted far awry, as if it had been wrenched away by violence.

Conford turned and looked back to the cabin, as if he measured the distance.

"There's been funny work here as sure's hell," he said profoundly.

Then they rode on, all silent, thinking. It was near dawn when they rode up along the sounding-board and put in at Last's. Billy reached up tender arms and took Tharon off El Rey, and for the first time she gave herself wearily into them as if she were done.

As she opened the door into her own dusky room the pale Virgin, touched by a silver shaft of the sinking moon, stood out in startling, etheral beauty, Her meek hands folded on Her breast. Tharon Last stumbled forward and sank in a heap at Her feet, her arms about the statue's knees.

"Hail—Mary—intercede for—him—" she faltered, and then the shining Virgin, the dim mystery of the shadowy room, faded out to leave

her for the first time in her strong life, a bit of senseless clay.

When she again opened her eyes the little winds of day were fanning her cheeks and old Anita was tugging at her shoulders, voluble with fright.

To the riders of Last's the tragedy was nothing more than any other that they had known in Lost Valley. They went about their work as usual.

Only Billy was filled with a sickening anguish at the knowledge that he was not able to offer one smallest saving straw to the girl in the big house —for Billy knew.

All day Tharon sat like a rock in her own room, staring with unseeing eyes at the blank white-washed walls. She did not yet know what ailed her, why this killing, more than that of poor Harkness, should make her sick to her soul's foundations. Yet it was so. Even the thought of her sworn duty was vague before her for a time. Then it seemed to come forward out of the mass of fleeting memories—Kenset that day at Baston's steps shapely, trim, halted—Kenset laughing over the little meal beside the table where the books lay—Kenset grasping her shoulder when she whirled to mount El Rey and challenge the Stronghold single-handed—to come forward like a calming, steadying thing and turn the pain to purpose.

There was no one now to hold her back, no vital hands to press hers upon a beating heart, to make her untrue to her given word!

Now she could go out, reckless and grim in her utter disregard of the outcome, and kill Courtrey where he stood. The time had come. There should be another cross in the granite beneath the pointing pine.

As if the whirling universe settled back to its ordered place the right proportion came back to her vision, the breath seemed to lighten her holden lungs.

Once again the girl arose and steadied herself, smoothed her tawny hair, looked at her hands to find them free from the shaking that had weakened them.

She dressed herself and went out among her people, quiet and pale.

The twilight had fallen and all the western part of the Valley was blue with shadow. Only on Kenset's foothills was the rosy light glowing, a tragic, aching light, it seemed to her. She saw all the little world of Lost Valley with new eyes, sombre eyes, in which there was no sense of its beauty. She wondered anxiously how soon she could meet Courtrey, and where. And then with the suddenness of an ordered play, the question was answered for her, for out of the dusk and

the purple shadows a Pomo rider came on a running pony and halted out a stone's throw, calling for the "Señorita," his hands held up in token of friendliness.

Without a thought of treachery Tharon went out to him and took the letter he handed her—swinging around for flight as the paper left his hand, for the riders of Last's were known all up and down the land. This dusky messenger took no chances he could avoid. He was well down along the slope by the time the boys came clanking around the house.

And Tharon, standing in the twilight like a slim white ghost, was staring over their heads, her lips ashen, the scrawled letter trembling in her hands. For this is what she read, straining her young eyes in the fading light.

"Tharon. You must know by now that I mean bisness. All this Vigilant bisness ain't a-goin' to help things eny. If it hadn't of ben that I love you, what you think I'd a-done to that bunch? That's th' truth. I ben holdin' off thinkin' you'd come to your senses an' see that Buck Courtrey ain't to be met with vilence. Now I'm playin' my trump card—now, tonight.

"Lola says you love this dude from below. That don't cut no ice with me. I ain't carin' for

no love from you at present. All I want is *you*. I can make you love me once I've got you safe at th' Stronghold. I ain't never failed with no woman yet. An' I mean to have you, fair means or foul.

"Rather have you fair. So here's my last word.

"This Kenset ain't dead—yet. I went and took him. I've got him safe as hell in the Cañon Country. Ain't no man in th' Valley can find God's Cup but me. He's guarded an' there's a lookout on th' peak above th' Cup that can see a signal fire at th' Stronghold. One fire out by my big corral means 'Send him out by False Ridge with ten days' grub.' Two fires means 'Put a true bullet in his head an' leave him there.' Now, here's the word. I've got a case fixed up to divorce Ellen, legal. If you'll marry me soon's I'm free, I'll build one fire out by that corral.

"If you say yes, you build one fire out by th' cottonwoods to th' left of the Holdin'. I'm watchin' an' will see it at once. You can see for yourself I mean bisness, as if you'll watch too, you'll see that one fire here.

COURTREY."

For a long moment the Mistress of Last's stood in profound quiet, as if she could not move. She

was held in a trance like those dreadful night-dreams when one is locked in deadly inertia, helpless. The net which had been weaving in Courtrey's fertile brain was finished, flung, and closing in upon her before she knew of its existence. An awe of his cleverness, his trickery, gripped her in a clutch of ice. The whole fabric of her own desires and plans and purposes seemed to crumple like the white ash in a dead fire, leaving her nothing. She had been out-witted instead of outfought. One more evidence of the man's baseness, his unscrupulous cunning.

He played his trump card and it was a winner, sweeping the table—for she knew before she finished that difficult reading that she would do anything in all the world to stop that "true bullet" in the heart that had pounded beneath her open palms. . . . Knew she would break her given word to Jim Last—knew she would forsake the Holding—that she would crawl to Courtrey's feet and kiss his hand, if only he would spare Kenset of the foothills, would send him out to that vague world of below, never to return!

She swayed drunkenly on her feet for a time that seemed ages long. Then life came back in her with a rush. She broke the nightmare dream and gasped out a broken command to her faithful ones.

"Billy!" she said thickly, "Oh, Billy! If you love me, run! Run an' build a fire—one fire!—only *one* fire, Billy, dear—out by th' cottonwoods to th' left—of th' Holdin'!"

Then she went and sat limply down on the step at the western door, leaned her head against the deep adobe wall, and fell to weeping as if the very heart in her would wash itself away in tears.

And Billy, numb with anguish but true to the love he bore her, went swiftly out and set that beacon glowing. Its red light flaring against the blue darkness of the falling night seemed like a bodeful omen of sorrow and disaster, of death and failure and despair.

Tharon on the sill roused herself to watch it leap and glow, then turned her deep eyes to where she knew the Stronghold lay.

Presently out upon the distant black curtain of the night there flared that other fire, signal of life to Kenset somewhere in the Cañon Country—and then her lips drew into a thin hard line and she straightened her young form stiffly up, put a hand hard upon her breast.

"A little time, Courtrey!" she whispered to herself, "Jus' a little time an' luck, an' I'll give you th' double-cross or die, damn your soul to hell!"

Billy, coming softly in along the adobe wall,

caught the whisper, felt rather than heard its meaning, and turned back with the step of a cat.

An hour later, when all the Holding was quiet for the night, drifting to early rest after the day's hard work, the Mistress of Last's, booted, dressed in riding clothes, her fair head covered by a sombrero, her daddy's guns at her hips, crept softly to the gate of El Rey's own corral. She went like a thief, crouching, watching, without a sound, and saddled the big stallion in careful softness. She led him gently out and around toward the cottonwoods, away from the house. When she was well away she put foot to stirrup and went up as the king leaped for his accustomed flight.

But Tharon pulled him down. She wanted no thunder on the sounding-board tonight. But soft as she had been, as careful, there was one at the Holding who followed her every act, who went for a horse, too, who saddled Drumfire in silence and who crept down the sounding-board—Billy the faithful. Far down along the plain toward the Black Coulee he let the red roan out, so that the girl, keen of hearing as of sight, caught the following beat of hoofs, stopped, listened, understood and reined El Rey up to wait.

And soon out of the shadows cast by the eastern ramparts, where the moon was rising, she saw

the rider coming. A quick mist of tears suffused her eyes, a sick feeling gripped her heart.

Here was another mixed in the sorry tangle! She had always known vaguely that Billy was one with her, that his heart was the deep heart of her friend.

He was the one she always wanted near her in times of stress, it was with him she liked to ride in the Big Shadow when the sun went down behind the Cañon Country.

But now she did not want him. She had a keen desire to see him safely out of this—this which was to be the end, one way or the other, of the blood-feud between the Stronghold and Last's.

Now as he loped up and stopped abreast of her in silence, she reached out a hand and caught his in a close clasp.

"I don't want you, Billy, dear," she said miserably, "not because I don't love you, but because I ain't a-goin' to see you shot by Courtrey's gang. This is one time, boy, when I want you to leave me alone, to go back without me."

The rider shook his head against the stars.

"Couldn't do it, little girl," he said wistfully, "you know I couldn't do it."

"Ain't I your mistress, Billy?" asked Tharon sternly. "Ain't I your boss?"

"Sure are," said the boy with conviction.

"Ain't I always been a good boss to you?"

"Best in th' world. Good as Jim Last."

"Then," said Tharon sharply, "it's up to you to take my orders. I order you now—go back."

The cowboy leaned down suddenly and kissed the hand he held.

"I'm at your shoulder, Tharon, dear," he said with simple dignity, "like your shadow. At your foot like the dogs that never forsake th' herds. I couldn't go back an' leave you—not though I died for it tonight.

"We'll say no more about it. I don't know where you're goin', but wherever it is, there I'm goin', too, an' on my way. You can tell me or not, just as you please, but let's go."

For a long time Tharon Last sat in the starlight and watched the crests of the distant mountains fringed with the silver of the moon that was rising behind them, and her throat ached with tears. All these things that hurt her, these unknown, tangled things that she knew dimly meant Life, had come to her with the advent of Kenset in Lost Valley. She wished passionately for a fleeting moment that he had never come, that the old swinging, rushing life of the ranges had never known his holding influence. Then she felt again

the hammering of his heart beneath her palms, and nothing mattered in all the world beside.

It was a thing beyond her ken, something ordered by fate. She must go on, blindly as running waters, regardless of all that drowned.

But she loosed her hand from Billy's, leaned to his shoulder, put her arm about his neck and drew his face to hers. Softly, tenderly, she kissed him upon the lips, and she did not know that that was the cruelest thing she had ever done in all her kindly life, did not see the deathly pallor that overspread his face.

"I'm goin' to th' Cañon Country, Billy," she said simply, "to find th' Cup o' God an' Kenset."

Then she straightened in her saddle and gave El Rey the rein.

It was two of the clock by the starry heavens when these two riders entered the blind opening in the Rockface and disappeared. El Rey, the mighty, tossed his great head and whistled, stamped his hoofs in the dead sift of the silencing floor. He had never before lost sight of the sky, never felt other breath in his nostrils than the keen plain's wind.

Now he shook himself and halted, went on again, and again halted, to be urged forward by Tharon's spurred heels in his flanks. Up

through the eerie pass they went without speech, for each heart was filled to overflowing with thoughts and fears.

To Billy there was something fateful, bodeful in the dead darkness, the stillness. It seemed to him as if he left forever behind him the open life of the ranges, the gay and careless days of riding after Tharon's cattle.

For five years he had lived at Last's, under master and mistress, content, happy. The half-remembered world of below had never called him. The light on the table under the swinging lamp with Tharon's face therein, the murmur of the stream through her garden, the whisper of the cottonwoods, these had been sufficient. He had, subconsciously, thanked his Maker for these things, had served them with a whole heart. They had been his all, his life. Now the cottonwoods seemed far away, remote, the life of the deep ranch house a thing of long ago. All these things had given way to something that sapped the sunlight from the air, the very blueness from the vaulted skies, something that had come with the quiet man of the pine-tree badge. So Billy sighed in the darkness and sat easily on Drumfire, his slim left hand fidgeting with the swinging rein.

And Tharon was lost, too, in a maze of

thoughts. She sat straight as a lance, tense, alive, keen, staring into the narrow bore of the high ceiled cut, thinking feverishly. Was Kenset really alive? Had Courtrey been square with her? Or was he even now lying stiff and stark somewhere in the high cuts, his dark eyes dull with death, that beating heart forever stilled? She caught her breath with a whistling sigh, felt her head swim at the picture. If he was—*if—he—was*—! She fingered the big guns at her hip and savagery took hold of her. Courtrey's left wrist to match his right. Then some pretty work about him to make him wait—then a shot through his stomach—he would spit blood and reel, but he wouldn't die—the butcher!—for a little while, and she would taunt him with Harkness—and Jim Last shot in the back—with Old Pete—and with —with Kenset—the one man—Oh, the one man in all the world whose quiet smile was unforgettable, whose vital hands were upon hers now, like ghost-hands, would always be upon hers if she lived to be old like Anita or died at dawn today! And Kenset had counseled her to peace! To keep the stain of blood from her own hands! She laughed aloud suddenly, a ghastly sound that made cold chills go down her rider's spine, for it was the mad laughter of the blood-lust! Billy knew that Jim Last in his best moments was

never so coldly a killer as his daughter was to-night.

So they traversed the roofed cut and came out into the starlight of the first cañon. Up this they went in single file. They passed the place where Albright had found the dark spray on the cañon wall, the standing rock where the gun with the untrue firing pin had kicked away its shell. A little farther on was the disturbed and trampled heap of slide which had held Old Pete's body. In silence they rode on, the horses' hoofs striking a million echoes from the reverberating cross-cuts.

The moon was shining above, but here there was only a sifted light, a ghostly radiance of starlight and painted walls. Tharon, riding ahead, went unerringly forward as if she traveled the open ways of the Valley floor. She turned from the main cañon toward the left and passed the mouth of Old Pete's snow-bed. Between this and that standing spire and pinnacle she went, with a strong certainty that presently stirred Billy to speech.

"Tharon, dear," he said gently, "hadn't we better leave a mark or two along this a-way? Ain't you got no landmarks?"

"Can if you want," the girl said briefly, "I don't need landmarks."

"Then how you know the way? There ain't no one knows th' Cañon Country—but Courtrey."

"I don't know it," she said simply but with profound conviction. "I'm *feelin'* it, Billy. I know I'm goin' straight to th' Cup o' God. I'm blind as a bat, it seems, yet goin' straight."

She lifted a hand and crossed herself.

"Goin' straight—Mary willin'—an' I'll come back straight. It lies up there an' to th' left again." She made a wide gesture that swept up and out, embracing the towering walls, the half-seen peaks against the stars.

Billy shut his lips and said no more.

Up there lay False Ridge, the sinister, dropping spine that came down from the uplands outside where the real great world began, and lured those who traveled down it to crumbling precipice and yawning pit, to sliding slope and slant that, once ridden down, could never be scaled again, according to the weird stories that were told of it.

But if Tharon went to the Cañons, there lay his trail, too. If she went down False Ridge to death in the pits and waterless cuts, he asked no better lot than to follow—the faithful dog at her foot, the shadow at her shoulder.

And so it was that dawn crept up the blue-velvet of the night sky and sent its steel-blue light

deep in the painted splits, and they rode unerringly forward up the sounding passes.

When the light increased enough to show the way they came abruptly to the spot where it was necessary to leave the horses. The floor of the cañon up which they were traveling lifted sharply in one huge step, breast-high to a man.

Tharon in the lead halted and looked for a moment all up and down the wondrous maze of pale, tall openings that encompassed them all round.

She turned in her saddle and looked back the way they had come. There was darker shadow, going downward, but here and there those pale mouths gaped, long ribbons of space dropping from the heights above down to their level.

Up any one a man might turn and lose himself completely, for they in turn were cut and ribboned with other mouths, leaving spires and walls and faces a thousand-fold on every hand.

Tharon, even in the tensity and preoccupation of the hour, drew in her breath and the pupils of her blue eyes spread.

"Th' Cañon Country!" she said softly, "I always knew it would be like this—too great to tell about! I knew it would hold somethin' for me—always knew it—either life an' its best—or death."

There was a simple grandeur about the earnest words, and Billy, his face grey in the steely light, felt the heart in his breast thrill with their portent.

No matter what the Cañons held for her—either that glorious fulfillment of life, or the simple austerity of death—he would have a part in it, would have served her to the last, true to the love he bore her, true to himself.

And nothing—nothing under God's heaven, save death itself—could ever wipe out the memory of that kiss, given from the depths of her loving heart, the sign-manuel of her undying affection and friendship, the one and only touch of her inviolate red lips that he had ever known the Mistress of Last's to give to any man, save Jim Last himself.

He wiped a hand across his forehead, damp with more than the night cold, and dismounted.

"We'll leave th' horses here," he said. "I've an extra rope to string across an' make a small corral."

He did not add that he would fasten this slim barrier lightly, so that a horse that really wanted to break out—in the frantic madness of thirst, say,—might do so.

Then he set about his task—but Tharon stood with strained eyes looking up—and up—and ever

up to the dimly appearing, looming spine of False Ridge.

Over there, she knew in her heart, lay the hidden Cup o' God, with its secret, the secret that meant all the world to her.

CHAPTER X

THE UNTRUE FIRING PIN

THARON turned back and looked long at El Rey. She wondered if she would ever see the great silver-blue stallion again, ever feel the wind singing by her cheeks, ever hear the thunder of his running on the hollow ranges. She saw the stain of Jim Last's blood on the big studded saddle and a pain like death stabbed her.

"I'll get him," she had promised on that tragic day, "so help me God!" and had made the sign of the Cross.

What did she now?

Cast away all certainty of that fulfilment because a man—a man almost a stranger—lay somewhere in the Cañon Country, crawled somewhere along False Ridge, perhaps, wounded and sick with fever.

"Oh, hurry!" she whispered as Billy made secure his last light knot in the rope gateway across the cut and came to join her.

She scrambled up the bench in the cañon floor, gained her feet and went forward at a rush.

"Steady, Tharon," warned the rider, "you ain't used to climbin'. Save your wind."

It was true advice. Long before the sun was high overhead and day was broad in the painted cracks she had begun to heed it. As she swung up the ever lifting floors, threaded this way and that between the thin intercepting walls that towered hundreds of feet straight up, she cast her wide eyes up in wonder. Always she had watched the Cañon Country from her western door, always it had held her with a binding lure.

There was that about its mystery, its austere majesty, that had thrilled her heart from babyhood. She had pictured it a thousand times and always it had looked just so—pink and grey and saffron, pale and misty with light when the sun was high, blue and wonderful and black as the luminary lowered, leaving the quick shadows.

Hour after hour they climbed, mostly in silence, speaking now and then some necessary word of caution, of assent. This way and that Tharon turned, but always moving upward in the same direction. From time to time Billy dropped a shred of the red kerchief about his neck, touched the soft walls with the handle of the knife he carried. This left a mark plain as a trail to his trained eyes.

At noon they halted for a little rest. From

Tharon's saddle Billy had taken the flask of water, the tightly rolled bundle of bread and meat in its meal-sack. They ate sparingly of this, drank more sparingly of the water. Billy wondered miserably how soon this last might become more precious than fine gold to him, as he thought of the waterless pockets of the blind and sliding country.

Long before she had rested sufficiently Tharon was up and ready to go. Ever her eager eyes were on the heights above. Ever they turned to the left of the steady line she set herself through and above the winding passes. From time to time Billy looked back. There was not a sign by which one might tell which way he had come if the last mark he made was around the first corner. Hundreds and thousands of spires and faces towered about them. It was a mystic maze of dead stone, cut and weathered by the elements.

"No wonder!" he told himself, "that the Indians call it the Enchanted Land!"

"We'll reach False Ridge tomorrow, Billy," Tharon told him confidently, "an' over it lies God's Cup. There's water there—an' Kenset."

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't know. Just feel. He's there—alive or—" a half sob clutched at her voice—"or dead. But he's there."

"There'll be some one with him if he's alive, most likely."

"Sure," said Tharon briefly.

All the afternoon they traveled, sometimes touching with outstretched hands the faces on either side of them, again walking upward through majestic halls, solemn and beautiful. Everything about them was beautiful, the height, the sheer, straight walls, the myriad little blue shadows of tiny projections on their faces. Night came so early in the pits that long before they wished they were compelled to camp. In a blind pocket, walled like a room and round as an apple, they stopped, and Billy spread down the blanket he had taken from Drumfire's back. This was their only preparation. They had nothing to do, no fire to build, no water to bring.

Tharon, scarcely conscious of the many miles she had traveled since the previous night, sat down upon the blanket, gathered her knees in her arms and stared at the vague blue phantoms of cliffs through the tall straight mouth that led into this sheltered pocket.

Outside the winds were drawing up the cañons. All day they had walked in this wind. It drew constantly up and down the cuts, this way and that, like contrary currents that met and fought each other, swung in together, went a little way in

peace, to again split and surge away through other channels. The echoes were alive with every sound, both of their own making and that of the wind's. A constant sighing droned through the depths, a mournful, whispering sound that sent the shivers down Tharon's spine, made her think sadly of all the tragedies she had ever known.

Billy, lying full length beside her, his hands beneath his head, looked up to the narrow blue spot of sky so far away, and thought his own thoughts, and they were not wholly sad.

They fell to talking, softly, in low tones, as if in all the mysterious solitude there might be one to hear, and it was mostly speech of long ago—when Billy had first come into Lost Valley.

After a long and quiet hour the man insisted that she should sleep—that after the hard day and in view of the coming hard morrow, she needed rest.

"But I'm not tired, Billy," Tharon protested, "no more'n as if I'd been ridin' all day after th' cattle."

But Billy shook his head and hollowed a little place in the soft slide stuff at the Wall's foot. In this he spread the blanket, folding it half back.

"Lie down," he commanded, "an' you'll be asleep so quick you won't know when it happens."

Tharon slipped off her daddy's belt and

stretched her slim young form in the hollow, which fitted it like a cradle. Not for nothing had Billy slept out many a night with nothing save the earth and stars for bed and blanket. The hollow was craftily deepened at hip and shoulder, making a restful couch. As she settled herself therein he lapped the loose half of the blanket over her and tucked it in. Then he took his hat, folded it sharply and placed it under the tawny head.

In its place he would fain have laid his heart.

His fingers, settling the improvised pillow, tangled themselves wistfully in the sun-bright hair, and the boy groaned aloud.

"What's the matter, Billy, dear?" asked Tharon anxiously, but Billy laughed lightly, a thin sound in the mighty caverns.

"Nothing in God's world, Tharon," he lied. "Now go to sleep."

And he walked away to the tall mouth and sat down with his back against one of the walls. From his pocket he took papers and tobacco and proceeded to roll himself a cigarette. . . . Dawn showed the narrow doorway strewn with their butts, as leaves strew mountain trails in autumn.

Things were ready to happen in Lost Valley—several things.

At the Golden Cloud, Lola looked across the level stretches toward the Stronghold with tragic dark eyes, and smiled at a dozen men whom she scarcely saw. Settlers from all up and down the Wall drifted into Corvan and out again, intent, silent, watchful. *Vaqueros* and riders from the Stronghold also came and went, as intent, as silent. They passed each other with hostile eyes and trigger fingers were unusually limber. The air was pregnant with change.

Buck Courtrey was conspicuous by his absence.

He was not seen in the town, neither was he at the Stronghold.

There were soft whispers afloat that he was with the Pomos up under the Rockface at the north.

And at the Stronghold, poor Ellen, whiter than ever, more like a broken lily drooping on its stem, trembled and waited for a day that was set soon—too terribly soon!—the day, farcically appointed, for the suit for divorce against her.

Word of this was abroad through all the Valley. Underground speculation was rife as to which of the two women whom Courtrey favoured, Lola or Tharon, was responsible. Some said one, some the other. But Lola knew.

Then came the day itself—a golden summer

day as sweet and bright as that one years ago when Courtrey had married Ellen—at this same pine building where the laughable legal farces were enacted now.

Pale as a new moon Ellen rode in across the rolling stretches on one of the Ironwoods, with Cleve beside her. She was spiritless, silent. Cleve was silent, too, though for a far different reason. There was a frown between his brows, a glitter in his narrowed eyes. He was thinking of the only man in Corvan whom he had been able to persuade to present Ellen's protest—Dick Burtree, one-time lawyer and man of parts in the outside, now a puffed and threadbare vagabond, whose paramount idea was whiskey and more whiskey. But Burtree could talk. Over his mottled and shapeless lips could, on occasion, pour a stream of pure oratory silver as the Vestal's Veil.

When he was drunk he feared neither man nor devil, and he could speak best so. Therefore Cleve had given him enough money in advance to put him in trim.

"What you think Buck'll say about me, Cleve?" Ellen asked anxiously. "What's he mean to accuse me of?"

"Any dirty thing he can trump up, Sis," said Cleve gravely, "he's a-goin' to make it a nasty

mess—an' I wish to God you'd jest ride on down th' Wall with me an' never even look back."

He leaned from his saddle and took the blue-veined hand in his. There was an unspeakable tenderness in his eyes as he regarded his sister. "What you say, Ellen? There's life below, an' work an' other men. You'll marry again, sometime——"

But Ellen shook her head with its maize-gold crown.

"Nary other man, Cleve," she said gently. "I'm all Buck's woman."

So they rode on toward the town, and Cleve knew that his last faint hope was dead.

In the town itself there was a stir. Courtrey was there, and Wylackie Bob, and Black Bart and Arizona, a bunch of dark, evil men in all surety.

The Ironwoods were in evidence everywhere, but strange to say, there were no Finger Marks. Not a man from the Holding was in town.

When Cleve and Ellen, alone together, rode in, it lacked yet a half hour of the time set for trial. There was no place to go but Baston's, so they dismounted at the hitch-rack. Ellen, swaying on her feet, looked all around with her big pale eyes, and when she saw Courtrey some distance away she put a hand to her heart as simply as a hurt child. She was a pitiful creature in her long

white dress, for she had ridden in on an old side-saddle, and she shook out the crumpled folds in a wistful attempt to look proper. On her head was the inevitable sunbonnet of slats and calico.

As she went up the steps of the store with Cleve, Lola of the Golden Cloud, blazing like a comet in her red-and-black came face to face with her purposely. What was in Lola's head none would ever know, but she wanted to see Courtrey's wife.

As they met they stopped dead still, these two women who loved one man, and the look that passed between them was electric, deep, revealing. They stood so long staring into each other's eyes that Cleve, frowning, plucked Ellen by the sleeve and made to push forward.

But as suddenly as a flash of light Lola reached out her two hands and caught Ellen's in a tight clasp that only women know, the swift, clinging clasp of the secret fellowship of those who suffer.

For one tense moment she held them, while Ellen swayed forward for all the world as if she would sink in upon the deep full breast of this wanton whom she had hated! Then the spell broke, they fell apart with a rush, Lola swung out and went down the steps, while Ellen obediently followed Cleve into Baston's store, where she sat on a nail keg and waited in a dull lethargy. Outside Courtrey, who had witnessed the thing from

across the street, slapped his thigh and laughed uproariously.

It was a funny sight to him. But Lola's beautiful black eyes blazed across at him with a light that none had ever seen before in their inscrutable depths.

Then the hour struck, and all Corvan, it seemed to Cleve, strung out toward the Court House. This was to be in open court—a spectacle. From somewhere in the adobe outskirts of the town came Ellen's serving women, most of them, whom Cleve had sent in early in the day. They fell in with her and so, with only the brother who had never failed her and these dusky women of the silent tongues to back her, Ellen Courtrey went to her crucifixion as truly as though she had been one of the two thieves on Golgotha.

At the sight of Courtrey across the big bare room she went whiter than she was, if such a thing were possible, and slid weakly into the chair placed for her.

Then the thing proceeded—swiftly, lightly, with smiles on the faces of the crowd.

Old Ben Garland on the judge's bench, was furtive, scared, nervous, fiddling with his papers and clearing his throat from time to time.

The county clerk at his table made a great

deal out of the ceremony of swearing in the witnesses—Wylackie Bob, Black Bart, Arizona and one young Wylackie Indian woman who worked at the Stronghold. Cleve put up only the serving women whom he had sent in, some seven of them, every one of whom loved their mistress with the faithful fidelity of a dog. These women knew Ellen Courtrey as not even the master of the Stronghold himself knew her. They knew her in her idle hours, at her small tasks, at her bedside, in the loving solicitude she displayed for all of them—and they knew her on her knees in prayer, for Ellen had a strange and simple religion, half Catholic and half Pomo paganism.

In the straight-backed chair they gave her Ellen sat like a statue, sweet and still, a thing so obviously good that it seemed even Courtrey himself must weaken to behold her. But not Courtrey. He was on fire with the vision of Tharon Last on the Cup Rim's floor, shaking her fist toward him in challenge—at Baston's steps calling him a murderer and worse—at her western door, striking him from her with the strength of a man. He saw the signal fire flaring across the darkened Valley —and nothing on earth or in Heaven could have softened him to the woman who bound him away from this fighting girl, this gun woman whom he was breaking to him slowly but surely. He vis-

ioned her in Ellen's room at the Stronghold—and the breath came fast in his throat.

And Ellen?

Ah, Ellen was thinking of the long past day when this man had found her in the barren rock-lands and taken her with the high hand of a lover. She, too, drifted away from the chilling courtroom with its judge and its petty officials . . . . And then all suddenly she knew that men were talking—and about her. She heard the drone of question and answer—the rambling statements of the stranger, Arizona, accusing her of strange things—of asking him to take her on rides in Courtrey's absence—of swinging with him nights in the hammock by the watering trough!

She sat and listened with parted lips and large innocent eyes fixed on the man in wonder. Cleve Whitmore clenched his hands until the nails cut deep, but he held his tongue and controlled his face. Only the blazing blue eyes spoke. She knew that Black Bart tried to tell something, that he made some mistake or other and had to begin all over again. There was a long and tedious time in here when she looked away out the window to where the prairie grass was blowing in the little winds and the shadows of clouds drifted across the green expanse. . . . She was numb and far away with misery. She did not care for anything

in all this world. It seemed as if she was detached, aloof, dead already in body as she was in soul. . . . And then she heard the drawling voice of Wylackie Bob—and he was saying something unspeakable—about her! She listened like one in a trance—then she struggled up from her chair with tragic long arms extended, and the cry that rang from her lips was piteous.

"Buck!" it pealed across the stillness of the crowded room, "Buck!—it ain't so! Never in this world, Buck! I ben true to you as your shadow! Before God, it ain't true!"

There was a stir throughout the crowd, a breath that was audible. There were many of the Vigilantes there—a goodly number, all wondering where Tharon Last was, where Kenset was, where were the riders from Last's. They had expected, what they did not know—something, at any rate, for this seemed somehow a test, a turning point. But there was nothing. They stirred and waited, like a great force heaving in its bed, blind, sluggish, but wakening.

And Ellen, chilled by Courtrey's sneering face, the cold disapproval of Ben Garland's striking mallet, sank back in her chair and covered her face with her shaking hands. . . . She heard some more awful things—then the voice of Dick Burtree beginning soft, low, silver like running

waters. She heard it tell of that far away day of her marriage—of the years that followed—of Courtrey's love for her—of her own gentleness, her beauty, "like the tender sunlight of spring on the snow and the golden sands"—of her service, her loyalty, her love that had "never faltered nor intruded" that "patient obedience to her master had but strengthened and made perfect." Of the pitiful thing that her life had been this man made a wondrous thing, all sweet with twilights and haloed with service.

He talked until the courtroom was still as death and the Indian women behind her were rocking in unison of grief. Then she heard questions again and the gutteral soft voices of her women answering—with love and devotion in every halting word. Once again the crowd in the room stirred—and Courtrey's narrow eyes went over it in that cold, promising glance.

For once in his life Courtrey, the bully, felt a premonitory chill down his spine—because for the first time that promising glance of his failed of its effect! Only here and there along the rows of faces did one cower. There were faces, many faces, that looked back at him with steady eyes and tight lips. . . . Verily it was time he conquered the riding, shooting, beautiful she-devil who had made this thing possible! The sooner he

got Tharon Last away from this bunch of spawn the better. Then he would sweep in with all his old swift methods, only sharper ones this time, and "clean" them all. When he got through it would be a different man's Valley, make no mistake about that!

Here Ellen looked straight into his eyes and both were conscious of the shock. Ellen wilted and Courtrey frowned and struck a fist against the railing near him. . . . He looked up and met the hesitating eyes of Ben Garland on the bench and his own hardened down to pin points.

The farce was finished save for the Judge's decision—Dick Burtree was slumped in his chair, dead drunk and asleep. Wylackie Bob was lighting a cigarette in his brown fingers, a smile on his evil mouth, his slow, black eyes covering the slim white form of Ellen in a speculative way, as if he dreamed of making true his blasphemous lies. Ellen was sweet as a flower in her open-lipped beauty, her panting despair. Wylackie did not notice the slim man beside her whose lips were so tight that they were a mere line across his face. No one at the Stronghold noticed Cleve much.

Then Ben Garland was speaking, and Ellen gathered her dim wits enough to make out that he was saying strange things—awful things—that had to do with Courtrey's freedom.

Then she knew—swaying and groping with her blue-veined hands—that the thing was done—that she was no longer a wife. That she would never again sleep in the bend of Courtrey's arm as she had slept in those golden days of long ago—that she was an outcast, blackened beyond all hope by the damning and unchoice words of Wylackie Bob. . . . Then the world faded out for Ellen in merciful blackness.

The petty officials rose with laughter and clanking of boots on the board floors—the crowd filed out in a striking silence. Never before had a crowd in Lost Valley gone out from a courtroom in that strange and bodeful silence.

The sight of Ellen lying white and limp across Cleve Whitmore's shoulder like a sack of grain, as he passed out with the moving mass, had an odd effect. It was partly the white dress that did it—and the time was ripe.

Courtrey and his gang were toward the fore—first out. They spread off to one side with jest and quip, with flash of bottle and slap on shoulder. The populace thinned a bit from the steps. . . . And then suddenly as a pistol shot Cleve Whitmore's voice rang out like a clarion.

"Wylackie!" it pealed across the subdued noises, "You - - - - - - - - - - hell hound. *Turn round!*"

There was death in it.

The gun man whirled, drawing like lightning. In the Court House door, Cleve Whitmore with his sister's limp form on his shoulder, beat him to it.

He had drawn as he called. Before the words were off his lips he pulled the trigger and shot Wylackie through the heart.

As his henchman fell Courtrey's good hand flashed to his hip, but Dixon of the Vigilantes, shot out an arm and knocked him forward from behind.

For the second time Courtrey had missed a life because a brave heart dared him. Old Pete had paid the price for that trick. Dixon had no thought of it.

And in one moment the chance was past, for a sound began to roar from that silent crowd which had poured from the courtroom—the deep, blood-curdling sound of the mob forming, inarticulate, uncertain.

For the first time in his life Courtrey felt real fear grip him.

He had killed and stolen and wronged among these people and gotten away with it. He had never feared them. They had been silent. Now with the first deep rumble from the concrete throat of Lost Valley he got his first instinctive thrill of disaster.

He stood for a moment in utter silence. Then he flung up his hands, snapped out an order, whirled on his heel and went swiftly to the near rack where stood Bolt and the rest of the Ironwoods. Like a set of puppets on strings his men drew after him—and they left Wylackie Bob where he fell.

In a matter of seconds the whole Stronghold gang was mounted and clattering down the street —out of the town toward the open range.

And the killer on the Court House steps?

He stood where he was and looked with blazing eyes over the motley crowd beneath him. Steptoe Service made a step toward him, looked round, wet his lips and thought better of it.

And then, in another second, the crowd was a mob and the mob was the Vigilantes. Some one took Ellen from Cleve's shoulder with careful hands and carried her away. Then some one reached down and picked him up bodily. Another joined, and they set him on their shoulders, lifting him high. The inarticulate mob cry swelled and deepened and rose to a different sound—a shout that gathered volume and roared out across the spaces where Courtrey rode with a menace, a portent.

With one accord the mob started on a journey around Corvan.

White as Ellen, Cleve Whitmore rode that triumphant journey, his eyes still blazing, his lips tight. The town went wild. Public feeling came out on every hand. Daring took the weak, hope took the oppressed, and they called Courtrey's reign right there. For three uproarious hours the bar-tenders could not wipe off their bars.

A new régime was ushered in—and she who had been its sponsor was not there to see it.

When the hour of Change was striking for Corvan and all Lost Valley, Tharon Last, who had set it to strike, was scaling False Ridge in the Cañon Country. Grim, ash-pale with effort, her blue eyes shining, she climbed the Secret Way that few had ever found.

How she had come to it through the tortuous cuts and passes was a marvel of homing instinct—the heart that homed to its object. It had seemed to her all along this strange, tense journey, that she had had no will of her own, that she had held her breath and shut her eyes, as it were, and gone forward in obedience to some strange thing within that said, "turn here," "go thus." Billy following behind, watched her with tight lips and a secret

wonder. As she had told him she would "go straight, Mary willing," so she had gone straight —and it seemed, truly, as if it were right that she should, no matter how his heart ached to see this thing.

Verily there was something supernatural about it all, something uncanny.

If it had been he, Billy, whom Tharon loved, and had he lain, wounded in the Cup o' God, would the girl have been given this blind instinct for direction? Would she have gone as unerringly to the Secret Way?

Nay—there must be something in the old saying that, for every heart in the world there was its true mate.

Tharon had found hers in Kenset.

But where would he ever find his? The boy shook his fair head hopelessly at the sliding floors. For all perfection there must be sacrifice. He was the sacrifice for Tharon's perfection—a willing one, so help him!

That they had found the Secret Way across False Ridge was perfectly plain, for here in the living rock before them were marks, the first marks they had found in the Cañons. Thin, small crosses, cut in the stone of the walls, began to lead upward from the last liftings cut straight up the Rockface of False Ridge itself. It seemed, to

look at the dim traces, that no living thing without wings could scale that steep and forbidding cliff, but when they tried to climb, they found that each step had been set with artful cunning. The set of steps followed the form of a "switchback," working from right to left, and always rising a little. False Ridge itself, a towering, mighty spine, came down in a swiftly dropping ridge from somewhere in the high upper country at the west of all the cañons. It was known to lead deceptively down among the cuts and passes, as if it went straight down to the lower levels, and to end abruptly in a precipice that none could descend or climb. On all its rugged sides there were treacherous slopes which looked hard enough to support a man, but which, once stepped on, gave sickeningly away to slide and slither for a hundred feet straight down to some abrupt edge, where they fell in dusty cataracts to blind basins and walled cups below.

In these blind cups were many skeletons of deer and other animals that had ventured down from the upper world, never to return. Somewhere up here must be the bones of Cañon Jim.

But the Secret Way was safe. Under every carefully worked out step there was solid stone, for every handhold there was a firm stake set. These stakes were old for the most part, but

here and there had been set in a new one—Courtrey's work, they made no doubt, for Courtrey was said to know the Cañons. It took Tharon and Billy two hours to make the climb, stopping from time to time to rest. At such times the boy stood close and took her hand. It was grim work looking down the sheer face, and one might well be excused for holding a hand for steadiness. And it would soon be the time for no more touches of this girl's fair self for Billy.

And so, climbing steadily and in comparative silence, these two, whose hearts were strong, came at last to the top of False Ridge—a thin knife-blade of stone—and looked abruptly and suddenly down on the other side.

With a little gasp Tharon put a hand to her throat, for there, an unbelievably short distance down, lay the Cup o' God, without a doubt. A small, round glade of living green, watered by a whispering stream that lost itself the Lord knew where, it lay like a tiny gem in the pink stone setting. Trees stood in utter quiet about its edges, for there was here no slightest breath of air. Lush grass carpeted its level floor. And there, almost directly under the marked way leading down, lay a tiny camp—the ashes of a dead fire, a gun against a tree, and—here Tharon leaned far out and looked as if her very spirit would pene-

trate the distance—a blanket spread on the level earth, on which there lay the body of a man!

It was a trim body, they could see from where they stood, clad in dark garments of olive drab that hugged the lean limbs close.

"Kenset!" whispered Tharon with paling lips. "Kenset of th' foothills,—an'—he—looks," she wet those ashy lips, "he—looks like he is dead."

Without another word she set her feet in the precarious way and went down so fast that Billy's heart rose in his throat and choked him, and for the first time since he could remember, he called fervently upon his Maker with honest reverence. He thought at every slip and scramble that she must fall and go hurtling down the Rockface.

But that uncanny instinct which had brought her this far was at her command still. She went down faster than it seemed possible for anything to go, and before the rider was able to catch up she had leaped to the grassy floor, and was running forward toward that still form on the blanket.

"Kenset!" she cried like a bugle, "Kenset! Kenset! Oh,—David!"

And then it was that the quiet form stirred, rolled over on its side, lifted itself on an elbow—and held out two arms that wavered grotesquely, but were eloquent of love's power and its need.

And the Mistress of Last's flung herself on her knees, gathered up this strange man as if he had been a child, pressed him hard against her breast, and kissed him as we kiss our dead. She pushed his face from her and looked into it as if she would see his very soul, the tears running on her white cheeks, her lips working soundlessly.

This was love! This agony—this ecstasy—this sublime forgetting of all the world beside—this reward after struggle.

Billy stood for a second at the foot of the Wall, and the nails cut in his palms. Then he whirled and went fast as he could walk toward the first trees that presented themselves—and he could not see where he was going for the bleak grey mist that swam in his eyes.

This was love! This dreary colour of the golden sunlight of noon in the high country—this dumb ache that locked his throat—this high courage that brought him serving love's object to the bitter-sweet end. How long he stood there he did not know. His heart was dead, like the weathered stone country about him. He knew that he heard Tharon's voice after a while, that golden voice which had been the bells of Last's, in rapid question and answer—and Kenset's voice, too, weak and slow, but filled with joy unspeakable. It was lilting and soft, a lover's voice, a victor's voice,

and presently he caught a few of the broken words that passed between them—"Clean! Clean! Oh, Tharon, darling—there is no blood on these dear hands! Tell me you did not kill Courtrey!"

He heard Tharon answer in the negative.

And then all the world fell about him, it seemed, for a gun cracked from the trees beyond him and a wasp stung his cheek.

In one instant the sunlight became brilliant again, the joy came back in the day. Here was something more to do for Tharon, a new task at hand when he had thought his tasks were all but done.

He whirled, looked, drew his six-gun and began firing at the man who stood in plain sight just where he had stepped into the Cup from the mouth of a little blind cut where the stream went out in noise and lost itself.

This was a big man, sinister and cold and dark, a half-breed Pomo of Courtrey's gang, a still-hunter who did a lot of the dirty work which the others refused. Billy had seen him before, knew his record.

Now they two stood face to face and fired at each other swiftly, coolly. He saw the half-breed stagger once, knew that he had touched him somewhere. And then a sound cut into the snapping of the shots, a sound that was like nothing he had

ever heard in all his life before, a sound as savage as the roar of a she-bear whose cub is killed before her eyes. As he flung away his empty gun and snatched the other, he moved enough to bring into his range of vision Tharon Last, standing over Kenset, her mouth open in that savage cry.

Then before he could draw and fire again he saw the prettiest piece of work he had ever witnessed. He saw the gun woman crouch and stoop, saw her hands flash in Jim Last's famous backhand flip, saw the red flame spurt from her hips, and the Pomo half-breed flung up his hands and fell in a heap, his face in the grass. He did not move. Only a long ripple passed over his body. He was still as the ageless rocks, as much a part of eternity. For a moment Billy stood, the gun hanging in his hand. Then he knew that Tharon was coming toward him—that her hands were on his shoulders—her deep eyes piercing his with a look that meant more to him than all the earth beside. It was the fierce, mother-look of changeless affection, the companion to that savage cry. She held him in a pinching grip, and made sure that he was unhurt, save for that scratch on the cheek.

"If he had killed you, Billy," she said tensely, "I'd a-gone a-muck an' shot up th' whole of Lost Valley."

And the boy knew in his heart she spoke the solemn truth.

He slipped his hands down her arms and caught her fingers tightly.

"Stained!" his heart whispered to itself in stifling exhilaration, "in spite of all—her first killin'—an' for me!"

Then he could bear her face no more, and turned to look at Kenset. Half off the edge of his blanket the forest man lay with his face buried in his hands, and beside him lay another gun, the smoke still curling from its muzzle.

"By God!" said the rider, softly, "what's this?" and he ran forward to pick up the weapon.

"Three of us!" he said aloud, "pepperin' him at once! Kenset, where did you get this gun?"

But Kenset did not speak. His shoulders trembled, his dark head was bowed to the earth.

"Answer me," said Billy, "for as sure's I live, this here's Buck Courtrey's favourite gun—the gun with the untrue firin' pin. Look here." And he held it toward Tharon who leaned near to look. True enough.

In the right side of the plunger there was a small, shining nick, as if, at some previous time, a tiny chink had been broken out of it.

"I found it where I saw Courtrey hide it that night they brought me here," said Kenset in a

muffled voice. "I crawled when the Pomo was out in the Cañons after meat."

"An' you used it—at last. I see. Not till th' last."

"No," said Kenset miserably, "not till the last."

Slowly Tharon knelt down beside him and put a tender arm across his shoulders. Her face was shining—like Billy's heart.

"Mr. Kenset," she said softly, "I told you once that I was afraid you was soft—like a woman—that you wouldn't shoot if you had a gun. An' you said, 'You're right. I wouldn't. Not until th' last extremity.'

"What was this last extremity? Tell me. Why did you shoot when you knew right well I'd get him myself? "

"To beat you to it!" cried the man with sudden passion, "to take the stain myself!"

For a long moment the girl knelt there beside him and gazed unseeingly at the inscrutable calm of the silent country. Something in the depths of her blue eyes was changing—deepening, growing in subtle beauty, as if the universe was suddenly become perfect, as if there was nowhere a flaw.

"There's only one kind of man, after all, Mr. Kenset," she said at last with a sweet dignity,

" th' man who is true an' honest to th' best there is in him, accordin' to his lights. That's my kind of man."

Then she rose, and it was as if a light of activity burned up in her. She became practical on the instant.

" I'm glad you brought th' thin rope, Billy," she said, "it's longer'n mine. An' th' little axe, too. We'll need 'em all to get him up an' down False Ridge. An' we must get busy right pronto. Th' Pomo killer we'll leave where he is. The Cañon Country will make him a silent grave."

CHAPTER XI

FINGER MARK AND IRONWOOD AT LAST

IT was another noon in Lost Valley. The summer sun sailed the azure skies in majesty. Little soft winds from the south wimpled the grass of the rolling ranges, shook all the leaves of the poplars. Down the face of the Wall the Vestal's Veil shimmered and shone like a million miles of lace.

At Corvan wild excitement ruled. Swift things had come upon them, things that staggered the tight-lipped community, even though it was used to speed and tragedy. For one thing, Ellen, pale, sweet flower, had hanged herself in the gaudy apartment of Lola behind the Golden Cloud where the dance-hall woman had peremptorily brought her when they took her off Cleve Whitmore's shoulder. She left a little note for Courtrey, a pathetic short scrawl, which simply reiterated that she had "ben true to him as his shadow," and that if he did no longer want her, she did not want herself.

At that pitiful end to a guiltless life, Lola, who

knew innocence and sin, sat down on the only carpeted floor in Corvan and wept. When she finished, she was done with Corvan and Lost Valley, ready to move on as she had moved through an eventful life.

For another thing, two strange men had ridden up the Wall from the Bottle Neck a few days back, and they had put through some mysterious doings.

This day at noon these two strangers were riding down on Corvan from up the Pomo way, while from the Stronghold, Buck Courtrey's men were thundering in with the cattle king at their head. He was grim and silent, black with gathering rage. His news-veins tapped the Valley, he knew a deal that others tried to hide, and he was coming in to reach a savage hand once more toward that supremacy which he knew full well to be slipping from him.

And from the blind mouth in the Rockface at the west where the roofed cut led to the mystery and the grandeur of the Cañon Country, a strange procession came slowly out to crawl across the green expanse—a woman on a silver horse, a rider on a red roan who sat behind the saddle and bore in his arms a man whose heavy head lolled upon his shoulder in all but mortal weakness.

Thus Fate, who had for so long played with life and death in Lost Valley, tiring of the play, drew in the strings of the puppets and set the stage for the last act.

As Tharon and Billy crept up to Baston's store and stopped at the steps, a dozen eager men leaped forward to their help.

"Easy!" warned the girl. "He's ben hurt a long time, an' he's had an awful trip. There's fever in him, an' th' wound in his shoulder opened a bit with th' haulin'. Lay him down on th' porch a while to rest."

But Kenset opened his dark eyes with the old quiet smile and looked at her.

"I'm worth a dozen dead men yet, Miss Last," he said.

As he lay, a trim, long figure in his semi-military garments, on the edge of the porch, the populace of Corvan streamed in from the outskirts and gathered in the open street. Whispers and comments were rife among them, a new courage was noticeable everywhere. The Vigilantes were present, many of them.

Question and answer passed swiftly and quietly back and forth between Dixon, Jameson, Hill and Tharon. In a few pregnant moments she knew what had happened in Corvan—they knew the secret of False Ridge and the Cup o' God.

"An' now these strangers from below—they ben a-actin' awful queer, ain't a-feared o' nothin' an' they ben goin' all over like a couple o' hounds. One of 'em's got on a badge of some sort," said Jameson, "didn't mean t' show it, I allow, but Hill, here, seen it by chanct——"

Kenset raised himself quickly on an elbow.

"By all that's lucky!" he said softly, excitedly. "Burn-Harris and O'Hallan! My Secret Service men!"

And it was even so, for by the end of another hour the two strangers came riding in and were brought forward to the steps where Kenset lay, to clasp his hand and greet him with all the pleasure of previous acquaintance.

Then they requested that a space be cleared to the end of ear-shot and together with Kenset, Tharon, Billy, and all the Vigilantes, they held a long and earnest colloquy.

At its end Kenset's eyes were deep and troubled, but Tharon's were beginning to glow with the old fire that all the Holding knew, the leaping flame that rose and died and rose again, exciting to the beholder, promising, threatening, unfathomable.

"Why, it's a cinch!" said O'Hallan, "a dead moral cinch! Don't see how it's held on like it has. Couldn't have in any other place in the good old

U. S. A. but this God forsaken hole! Well named, Lost Valley! Why, we've found enough evidence already to convict a dozen men! Your Courtrey's the man that planned a dozen murders, I can see that, and he's pulled off a lot of them himself. The people are talking now, rumbling from one end of the Valley to the other. We've had to hold up our hands to ward them off lately. Your Vigilantes here have opened up since we got them together and showed some of them your letter. You were wise to tell us to go ahead if you were not here—what did you look for?"

"Just about what I got," said Kenset smiling, "and I wanted things to be pushed through anyway."

"Well,—they're pushing," said Burn-Harris. "Your little old sheriff has had the fear-of-the-Lord put into him somewhat. He's shaking in his boots about the snow-packer. There's only one thing lacking to make our grip close down on Courtrey, and that's vital—the gun with the untrue firing pin you speak about in your instructions."

"Not lackin'," said Tharon grimly, "we've got it, Mister."

The Secret Service man whirled to her.

"You have?" he cried, "then show me your man!"

But Tharon stood for a long moment looking off across the rolling green stretches, toward the north where a moving dot was drawing down—the riders from the Stronghold.

"This," she said at last, tapping the gun which Billy handed over, "this, then, is proof—is proof in law?"

"If it's the true gun that fits the shell which Mr. Kenset left for us here at Baston's—yes."

"Then," said Burn-Harris, "a little time and your man's ours as sure's the sun shines. Why, this is a hot-bed of crime—there's enough work here to keep a whole force busy for months."

But Tharon Last did not heed his words. Her mind had leaped away from the present back to that day in spring when Jim Last came home to die. She heard again his last command, "Th' best gun woman in Lost Valley," heard her own voice promising to his dulling ears, "I'll get him, so help me, God!"

And this was the end. Strangers were waiting to fulfill that promise, to take her work out of her hands. She absently watched the moving dot take form and sharply string out into a line of riding men. These strangers with their hidden signs of authority would bring to his just desserts Buck Courtrey, the man who had instigated the killing of poor Harkness, who had personally shot her

daddy in the back! For them, then, she had made her crosses of promise in the granite under the pointing pine.

They who had no right in Lost Valley would settle its blood scores, would pay her debts!

She frowned and the fingers of her right hand fiddled at the gun-butt at her hip.

For what had she striven all these many months? For what had she perfected herself in Jim Last's art?

A little white line drew in about her lips, the flame in her blue eyes leaped and flickered. The tawny brows gathered into a puckered frown.

Billy, watching, moved restlessly on his booted feet. He it was who saw—who feared. He touched her wrist with timid fingers and she flashed him a swift glance that half melted to a smile. Then she forgot him and all the rest—for the Ironwoods were thundering in from the outside levels, were coming into town.

Ahead rode Courtrey, big, black, keen, his wide hat swept back on his iron-grey hair, an imposing presence.

"Here's your man!" said Kenset softly, rising excitedly on his elbow. "He's coming! And God grant that there is no bloodshed!"

All of Corvan, so long meek and quiet under Courtrey's foot, moved dramatically back to give

him room to come thundering down to his accounting.

In a few seconds he would be encompassed by his enemies.

And then, on the tick of fate, that universally unknown factor, a woman's heart, flung its last pawn in the balance.

Lola, gleaming like a bird of paradise in her gay habiliments, leaning forward from the further steps of Baston's store where she had slipped up unnoticed, cupped her white hands to her scarlet mouth, and sent out a cry like a clarion.

"Buck!" she called, bell-like, clear, far-reaching—"Buck! Turn back! They've called your turn! It's all up for you! Go! Go—down—the Wall! And—God bless you—Buck! Goodbye!"

For one awful moment the great red Ironwood, Bolt, flung up his head and slid forward on his haunches, ploughing up the earth in a cloud.

Then, while the half-stunned crowd gaped in silence, he gathered himself, straightened, whirled, shook his giant frame and leaped clear of the ground in a spectacular turn. The man on his back snatched off his hat and shook it defiantly at the town—the people—the very Valley that he had ruled so long. It was a dramatic gesture—daring, scorning, renouncing. Then, without a

word to his henchmen, a single look of farewell, Buck Courtrey struck the Ironwood, and was gone back along the little street.

His men whirled after him, but strange turn of destiny, they swung directly north away from him, for he was turning south at the town's edge.

"For the—Wall!" breathed Lola, her face like milk, one hand on her glittering breast. "He—goes—for below!"

Then all the watchers knew the same.

The master of the Stronghold, having played for Lost Valley and for a woman and lost them both—was done with both.

He leaned on the Ironwood's mighty neck and went south toward the Bottle Neck.

All eyes were upon him—all, that is, save the earnest grey ones of Billy Brent. They were fixed in anguish on the face of Tharon Last beside him—Tharon Last, who shoved the gun-butts hard down in the holsters at her hips, who whirled on her booted heel, who cleared the space between her and El Rey in three cat-like leaps.

As she went up the stallion rose with her, came down with a pounding of iron-shod hoofs, dropped his huge hips in the first leap—and was away.

Corvan saw the silver horse shoot out from its midst and woke from its lethargy.

"Th' race!" some one cried, high and shrill, *"th' race at last!"*

The two strangers saw it, and their lips fell open with amaze.

Kenset from his low porch saw it—and dropped his face on his arms.

"Lord God!" he groaned, "it's come! I couldn't hold her! I might have known! I might have known! She's Valley bred—she *is* the Valley! I—and all I stand for—chaff in the wind! Nothing could hold her now! Aye—nothing could hold her."

True at last to herself—true to Harkness—true to Jim Last—true to the Vigilantes and to the Valley she loved, Tharon flung the sombrero from her bright head, settled her feet in the stirrups, slid the rein on El Rey's neck, leaned down above him and began to call in his ears.

No need of that cry.

El Rey heeded nothing that she might say. She was not his master—never had been. He had had but one, the big, stern man whose sharp word had been his law—the one who had ever had his best, his love and his speed.

What was it now that rode in his saddle—the saddle with the long dark stain?

Assuredly it was not the slim girl-thing with the golden voice!

El Rey had ever looked through, beyond her. Nay, it was something bigger, stronger, sterner—who shall say? Perhaps the spirit of that master whom he had served, whom he had brought faithfully home that night in spring, for whom he had looked and listened all these weary months! There was something, indeed—for El Rey, the great, lay down to earth and ran without the need of guidance. He set the long red horse out there on the green plain before him like a beacon and put the mighty machinery of his massive body into motion. Bolt was a rival worthy of his best—Bolt, the king of the Ironwoods, huge, spirited, fast as the wind and wild as fire. El Rey's silver ears lay back along his neck, the mane above them was like a cloud, his long tail streamed behind him like a comet—and forgotten was his singlefooting. He ran, his great limbs gathering and spreading beneath him—gathering and spreading—with the regularity, of clock-work.

Tharon's blue eyes were narrow as her father's, the little lines about them stood out. She rode low, like a limpet clinging, and her mind was on the two ahead—the man and the great bay horse.

As she felt the wind sing by her cheeks, sting the tears beneath her lids, she shut her lips tighter and hugged the pommel closer.

The green carpet went by beneath her like a

blur. The thunder of El Rey's beating hoofs was like the sound of the cataracts when the cañons shot their freshets from the Rockface.

The note of his speed was rising—rising—rising. The blood began to pound in her temples with pride and exultation.

She saw the distance narrowing just the smallest bit between her and Courtrey. Just the smallest trifle, indeed, but *narrowing*.

"He ain't a-puttin' Bolt down to his best," she told herself tensely, "I know what he can do." And she remembered that ride from the mouth of Black Coulee to the pine-guarded glade—and Kenset. At that thought she pressed her lips tighter.

No thought of Kenset must come to her now—to weaken her with memory of those pressing, vital hands of his above his pounding heart.

No—she was herself again—Tharon Last, Jim Last's girl, the gun woman of Lost Valley—and yonder went her father's killer.

She leaned down and called again in El Rey's ear.

No slightest spurt of speed rewarded her—nothing but the rising note. Then she saw that the distance was widening—just a tiny bit.

Truly it was widening. Courtrey, looking back, had caught the sun on her golden hair, on her face

as white as milk. He saw that her hands were at her hips—loosely set back at her hips—and what thought he might have had of mercy at her hands —what wild vision he might have seen of speech with her—of parley—of persuasion—was dead.

He leaned down and struck the Ironwood with his open hand.

Bolt, the beautiful, leaped in answer. A little more—slowly—the distance between pursuer and pursued widened. Then—Tharon blinked the mist from her eyes to make sure—the gain was lost. Slowly, steadily, El Rey closed up the extra width. Then for a time there was no change. The open plain resounded to the roar of hoofs, the wind sang by like taut strings struck. The earth was still that racing green blur beneath.

And still the electric note of rising speed hummed softly higher.

If Jim Last rode his silver stallion to the goal of vengeance he must surely have been satisfied. The great shoulders worked like pistons, the whole massive body was level as the flowing floor beneath, the steel-thewed limbs reached and doubled —reached and doubled—with wonderful power and precision.

And then at last Tharon knew—knew that El Rey was gaining, slowly, steadily, surely. The splendid bay horse was running magnificently, but

El Rey ran like a super-horse. His silver head was straight as a level, his ears laid back, his nostrils wide and flaring, red as blood, his big eyes glowed with the wildness of savage flight.

The great king was mad with speed!

Jim Last's girl was mad also—mad with the lust of conquest, of revenge.

She rose a little from the stallion's whipping mane, and her blue eyes burned on the man ahead.

"I said I'd get you, Buck Courtrey!" she muttered, "that some day I'd run th' Ironwoods off their feet—th' heart out of their master!

"Run, damn you—for it's your last ride!"

Then she dropped forward again and watched the distance closing down.

Nearer—nearer—nearer!

The note rose another notch.

Never in his life had El Rey run as he ran now. Always he had had reserves. He had them now. The bottom of his power was not reached.

Bolt was doing his best. Once he threw up his head and foam flew on the wind—red foam that shot back and whipped on Tharon's hand, a wet pink stain, thinned and faded.

At that sight an exultant cry, savage, inhuman, ugly, burst from her throat.

She was within long gunshot now—was closing her fingers lightly on the blue gun-butts———.

Courtrey heard that cry.

He rose in his saddle—turned—flashed up his hand and fired. Quick as the motion of the gun man was, Tharon Last was quicker. She dropped over El Rey's shoulder like a cat, firing as she went.

Courtrey's bullet clipped the cantle of the big saddle an inch above her flattened leg across it. Hers did something else—what she had dreamed of. It struck that other wrist of Courtrey's, the left—and sent his six-gun tumbling.

Once again she yelled as she came back in her saddle.

And El Rey was closing—closing up the gap between.

Once again Tharon raised her guns to shoot—both, this time, as her daddy had taught her. This was the pinnacle of her life, her skill, her training.

Never again would she live a moment like it. She laughed and crouched for the final act.

But a sudden coldness went over her from head to foot, sent the hot blood shaking down her spine.

What was Courtrey doing?

He rode straight up at last, like an Indian showing, and his bleeding left hand swung at his side. With the other he had swept off his wide

hat, so that his handsome iron-grey head was bare to the summer sun. His keen hawk face was lifted. He made a spectacular figure—like a warrior, unarmed, waiting his end with courage.

Unarmed!

That it was which struck Tharon like a hand across her face. The gun he had used with his left hand was his only one! He had carried but one since that night at the Stronghold when she had first marked him.

She should have known! Word of this had been about Corvan and the Valley.

And so she had Buck Courtrey at her mercy. She could close the lessening gap and kill him in his saddle———

But the icy blood still seemed to trickle down her back.

She—and Jim Last—they had always fought in fair-and-open. They were no murderers. . . . They did not strike in the dark—shoot a man from ambush—nor kill a man unarmed. . . . And Kenset—Kenset of the foothills—what had he said about the stain of blood—blood-guilt—clean hands———

The girl caught her breath with a choking sob.

The game was up.

Neither Jim Last—nor Kenset—nor she———would shoot a man unarmed.

And Courtrey was riding toward the Bottle Neck.

He would go down the Wall to freedom.

And the crosses in Jim Last's granite—they would be forever unredeemed, a shame, a sadness, a living accusation!

Nay—not that! Not that!

She had promised—and the Law was waiting—the big Law of below.

She was Jim Last's daughter still.

She leaned closer to El Rey's neck—held her two guns ready—and rode with the very wind.

She was near now—she could see Courtrey's face, waxen white but fearless, his dark eyes turned back toward her in a sort of desperate admiration. . . . Courtrey loved strength and courage and all things wild and fierce. She could see Bolt's staring eyeballs, his open mouth, gasping and piteous. One more moment—another—yet one more—then she rose in her stirrups and fired straight at the broad bay temple, shining and black with sweat!

The great gallant Ironwood went down in a huge arc—first his beautiful head, then the sinking arch of his neck, then the shoulders that had worked so wondrously. He rolled on his back like a hoop, his iron-shod hoofs spinning for one

spectacular moment in the air. Then he lay at sudden ease, his still fluttering nose pointing directly back the way he had come.

With the first catching stumble of the true forefeet, the man on his back had shot out of the saddle and far ahead. He landed twenty feet away and squarely on his head and shoulders. Like Bolt, Courtrey's body turned a complete somersault—and lay still, at sudden peace.

Tharon Last and El Rey went on like an arrow —they could not stop.

When at last she did draw the great king down she was far and away from the spot. She turned her head, panting and dizzy, and looked back. . . . She could see the prone red heap that was Bolt—a little way beyond that other, lesser, darker heap. . . .

For a long time she sat on El Rey's heaving back and stared unseeingly at the green earth where the short grasses quivered in the little wind.

There was a deathly white line about her lips, but her eyes blazed with the fire that had characterized them from birth, the flickering, unfathomable flame that came and went.

Then, presently, new lines came in her young face, unstable lines that quivered and worked, and all the good green earth danced grotesquely before her vision, for a wall of tears shut out the world.

looking at her as if he would fix forever in his memory the beauty of her, the fire, the spirit, the elusive quality that was Tharon Last herself.

Then he sighed and smiled and gently shook the hand he held.

" Come—tell me good-bye, Tharon, dear," he said softly.

For answer the mistress of Last's once again reached out her arms and drew his head to her heart—once more pressed her lips upon his own.

" Oh, Billy," she said with a sound of tears in her voice, " Kenset's th' one man—that's true, an' I'm helpless before th' fact—but there'll never be another can take your place in my heart—there'll never be no one to ride with me in th' Big Shadow in just th' same way, Billy—to hold my hand as we come home to Last's with that same sweet, honest friendship, that don't need words! I've got my life-love, but I've lost my life-friend—an' my heart's sore—sore with pain! "

The rider lifted his face and it was glorified in the first rays of the sun that was rising over the eastern mountains. His gayly studded belt and riding cuffs, his spurs and the vanity of silver on his wide hat caught the glow and sparkled brightly. Joy became paramount over sadness.

" Don't you fret, Tharon," he said, still in that soft voice, " I'm always at your shoulder in spirit

—in body, too, if you ever want me or need me. So long."

And he kissed both the hands he held, dropped them, turned and mounted Golden, waved a hand to all the Holding, and putting the horse to a run, went down the sounding-board as if he dared not look back.

Until horse and rider were a tiny speck on the living green—until they passed the Silver Hollow and the mouth of Black Coulee, Tharon Last stood in the western door and watched them with dim blue eyes.

All the wide expanse of Lost Valley was still and sweet with dawn, smiling as if with a new and wondrous peace, the Vestal's Veil shimmered on the Rockface, the distant peaks above the Cañon Country cut the skies.

She scanned the little world about and felt this peace press down upon her soul—as if the questions all were answered, the duty done.

Never in all her life before had Last's Holding seemed to her so secure and settled, so sweet and to be desired. . . .

Within it lay her destiny—the man in the cool south room.

Without in the great Valley lay a future.

Love was with her—friendship would be with her always in memory, one glowing with its vital

presence, the other softened and doubly sweet with the sorrow of absence.

She raised her hand and made the sign of the Cross between herself and that disappearing speck, then she turned and followed old Anita carrying gruels to that dim south room.

THE END

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